

## Exile, Identity, and Political Displacement in the Postcolonial Writings of Rohinton Mistry and Bapsi Sidhwa

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Abstract:

Exile and identity are the essence of postcolonial discourse in South Asian literature, notably in the writings of Rohinton Mistry and Bapsi Sidhwa, both of whom are affiliated with the historically marginalised Parsi community. The Parsis, who escaped Persia centuries ago to protect their Zoroastrian faith, represent exile not just as a historical event but as an ongoing state of awareness. This study examines the interplay between political displacement and individual and communal identity in the works of Mistry and Sidhwa, contextualising their tales within the socio-political turmoil of postcolonial South Asia. This research analyses Mistry's *A Fine Balance* (1995) and Sidhwa's *An American Brat* (1993), investigating how the traumas of Partition, the Emergency, and the development of Islamic extremism influence the existential crises of its Parsi characters. Both writers see political unrest as a sign of moral and social deterioration, with women and people from lower castes being the most affected by violence from both ideologies and institutions. Mistry's depiction of caste persecution and political brutality during the Emergency enhances Sidhwa's indictment of military rule and religious conservatism in Pakistan. Utilising Nilufer Bharucha's term of the "Partition Diaspora," the study contends that Parsi literature reflects several diasporas—historical, cultural, and psychological—each reshaping concepts of identity and belonging. Through the prism of political exile, both novels provide a comprehensive critique of postcolonial modernity, portraying exile not just as geographic displacement but as a significant condition of moral dislocation and cultural disintegration.

**Keywords:** Exile; Identity; Parsi Diaspora; Postcolonial Politics; Gender and Displacement

### Introduction

Exile and identity are profoundly interconnected issues in postcolonial literature, especially in the writings of Rohinton Mistry and Bapsi Sidhwa. Both writers originate from the Parsi community, a tiny population in South Asia with a lengthy history of migration, having departed Persia centuries ago to evade religious persecution. Their works illustrate the historical displacement and ensuing marginalisation of their group in their chosen motherland, India. The political upheavals of postcolonial South Asia, including the Emergency in India (1975–1977) and the Partition of India in 1947, exacerbated sentiments of exile, alienation, and identity crises for people and groups. This study analyses the representation of political displacement and its effects on identity in the writings of Mistry and Sidhwa, emphasising how the historical exile of the Parsi community shapes their literary portrayals of contemporary political upheaval. This study examines the struggles of characters with physical and emotional exile in Mistry's *A Fine Balance* (1995) and Bapsi Sidhwa's *An American Brat*, while also analysing the influence of political factors on personal and community identity. The Parsi community, originally Zoroastrians from Persia, migrated to India in the 8th and 10th centuries to evade Muslim persecution. Throughout the ages, they assimilated into Indian culture while preserving their religious and cultural uniqueness. During colonial India, Parsis flourished, particularly in Bombay (now Mumbai), where they emerged as a prosperous and important minority. Postcolonial India, however, posed additional issues for the Parsi community, which saw a declining population, marginalisation, and a feeling of incomplete belonging in the emerging nationalistic landscape.

### Literature Review:

Exile, Identity, and the Parsi Diaspora in Mistry and Sidhwa Research on postcolonial exile and diaspora has increasingly highlighted minority populations as arenas of intricate, multifaceted identity development. Homi Bhabha and Stuart Hall, among others, have contended that diasporic individuals exist in "in-between" regions, where identity is constructed via hybridity, memory, and negotiation, rather than through rigid, essentialist classifications. In this theoretical context, South Asian Parsi authors like Rohinton Mistry and Bapsi Sidhwa have become prominent figures analysing the conflict between historical exile and modern political displacement. Critics who have written on Mistry have focused on how he shows the Parsis as a doubly marginalised group: first as a community of refugees in mediaeval India and then as a small, diasporic minority in urban India after colonialism. Javed's "A Postcolonial Study of Rohinton Mistry's *Such a Long Journey*" and "Rohinton Mistry as a Postcolonial Novelist" interpret his Parsi characters as symbols of cultural nostalgia and anxiety, examining how religious rituals and domestic environments serve as venues for the preservation of a contested identity. These analyses frequently link Mistry's Parsi awareness to overarching postcolonial motifs of identity, loss, and the "mini-India" represented by Bombay's cosmopolitan mix. Other articles about *A Fine Balance* have looked at the book as a "postcolonial humanist text," showing how the Emergency period shows how hypocritical the Indian state is and how legal and political systems keep caste and class inequities in place instead of getting rid of them. Concurrent scholarship on Bapsi Sidhwa has focused on her position as a prominent Parsi-diasporic author and her concerns over Partition, migration, and gender. Sidhwa's *Ice-Candy-Man* has been extensively examined as a feminist-postcolonial narrative of Partition, whereby the child-narrator's perspective reveals the sexualised violence and sectarian divisions that emerged during the formation of India and Pakistan. Scholars, like Javed and others, have observed that Sidhwa's first-person narration feminises historical tragedy by transposing significant political themes into the personal realms of family, friendship, and corporeal experience. Subsequent studies have looked at her subsequent books in the same way, seeing them as investigations of hybridity, assimilation, and "negotiating of diasporic sensibility" in everyday life. Several recent studies have specifically examined *An American Brat* as a diaspora text focused on Parsi migration from Pakistan to the United States within this critical discourse. Studies like "A Postcolonial Study of Bapsi Sidhwa's Fiction" and "Theme of Diaspora in Bapsi Sidhwa's *An American Brat*" show how Feroza's journey is both voluntary and forced: she leaves Pakistan to get away from rising Islamic fundamentalism, but she is unsure about her cultural authenticity and belonging while she is in America. Other research, like "Diaspora in Bapsi Sidhwa's *An American Brat*," shows how the book focuses on conflicts between different groups in the Parsi society, especially when it comes to gender roles and marriage. It also criticises the anti-democratic and misogynistic aspects of Zia-ul-Haq's dictatorship. An increasing corpus of comparative literature now integrates Mistry and Sidhwa under a unified postcolonial paradigm. Recent essays, like "Exploring Identity, Politics, and Cultural Trauma: A Comparative Study of *Ice-Candy-Man* and *Such a Long Journey*," contend that both authors utilise Parsi subjectivity to critique the psychological and moral ramifications of Partition and tyranny. These comparative analyses illustrate that Sidhwa elucidates the cracks within Pakistan through Partition-era trauma, while Mistry critiques the moral degradation of India during the Emergency, each demonstrating the transformative impact of political violence on personal relationships and communal borders. Collectively, this study positions exile and diaspora as important to comprehending Parsi literature in postwar South Asia. Nonetheless, the majority of current studies either examine Mistry or Sidhwa in isolation or concentrate predominantly on trauma, gender, or hybridity, failing to comprehensively analyse the interplay between political displacement and community-specific histories of exile. Your work can thus address a deficiency by directly connecting: 1) the Parsis' historical exodus from Persia; 2) their marginalisation in postcolonial India and Pakistan; and 3) the gendered, corporeal experiences of exile in *A Fine Balance* and *An American Brat*, providing a more cohesive narrative of political displacement and identification in both writers.

### An Analysis of Exile, Identity, and Political Displacement

The notion of historical exile underpins the works of Mistry and Sidhwa. In their works, characters frequently contend with their marginal status in society, navigating the tension between their cultural identity as Parsis and the political realities of the broader Indian or Pakistani context.

The Parsi community has existed in diaspora since their exodus from Iran in 850 AD to evade coerced conversion to Islam. During the era of British colonialism, they possessed a privileged position equivalent to that of the governing English.

In 1947, during the split, they were compelled to select either India or Pakistan as their domicile, resulting in their transformation into a split Diaspora. Since the 1970s, they, like to other educated Asians, have opted to travel to the West, so establishing a Western diaspora. Since the 1980s, several individuals have significantly contributed to postcolonial diasporic literature from the subcontinent.

In *An American Brat*, Sidhwa examines the intricacies of Parsi identity, Pakistani nationality, and the experience of migrating to the West while embodying the other two identities. Feroza, a Parsi adolescent, is sent to America by her parents, Cyrus and Zareen Ginwala, to evade the rising religiosity in Pakistan. Nilufer Bharucha elucidates the rationale behind Parsi migration to the West in "Reflections in Broken Mirrors: Diverse Diasporas in Recent Parsi Fiction." She notes: "It is this disparity between the Parsis' elevated consciousness and their diminished status in postcolonial India that the migrant Parsi seeks to transcend."

The disquiet associated with the decline of Empire among the Indian diaspora prompted a significant migration of Parsis to the West during the 1950s, 60s, and 70s. Nonetheless, there exists a degree of shame associated with this choice Western diaspora, in contrast to the sense of self-esteem derived from the compelled diaspora from Iran. This study will analyse Sidhwa's *An American Brat* for its historical representation and portrayal of the contemporary political landscape on the formerly colonised subcontinent, viewing it as emblematic of expatriate Third World women's engagement with history and politics in their literature. The works of women authors not only illustrate the distinction between colonial and postcolonial contexts but also signify a feminisation of history. Feminising cultural knowledge entails removing it from its active position within a historical context and situating its significance inside a private realm of gendered awareness. Sidhwa, in her works, addresses both historical and contemporary issues, aiming to feminise them through a critical examination of women's roles within certain historical and political contexts. Her work *An American Brat*, akin to Meena Alexander's *Nampally Road*, is focused on the collapse of democracy and the pervasive chaos that has engulfed the newly established nation-states of the subcontinent. Similar to previous immigrant novels, it addresses the socio-political circumstances of the author's own country, Pakistan, and references subcontinental religious and political history that serves as the backdrop for the tale.

The novel, like to the preceding *Ice-Candy-Man* and *The Crow Eaters*, explores the diminutive Parsi community and examines the lives of Parsi characters as constituents of a disadvantaged minority in Islamic Pakistan. *Ice-Candy-Man* is necessary to contextualise *An American Brat*. In *Ice-Candy-Man*, the author juxtaposes the confident Parsis of 1945, secure in their identity and religious customs in Pre-Partition Pakistan and the nascent states of India and Pakistan, with the Pakistani Parsis under General Zia ul Haq, four decades later. Sidhwa remarks in the *Indian Review of Books*, "The book is not devoid of a darker aspect." One cannot discuss politics globally or within the community without depicting a rather dismal scenario.

The novel serves as a socio-political critique of a grim society plagued by political instability, military oppression, and rising Islamic fundamentalism. *An American Brat* elaborates on the growing sense of apprehension experienced by the Parsi community in Pakistan. Sidhwa discusses the pervasive decline into authoritarianism under the guise of religion, noting that even non-Islamic populations, such as the Parsis, have been impacted by the rising fundamentalism. Zareen expresses concern that her daughter's behaviour is influenced by the regulations. She states:

She opposed my sleeveless sari blouse! This myopic perspective  
The mindset promoted by General Zia is influencing her as well. I instructed her: "Observe,  
We are Parsee; it is widely recognised that our attire is distinctive.  
At her age, I donned frocks and rode a bicycle to Kinnaird College.  
That occurred in 1959 and 1960, fifteen years subsequent to Partition. Is she able to  
don dresses? Negative. Women should not display their legs.

Women should not dress in this manner, nor should they behave in that way. Girls should not engage in play. Engage in hockey, singing, or dancing! If all becomes tainted, their devout facade

If minds are so readily influenced, then the mullahs need to don burqas and remain indoors.  
the confines of their residences!

This is a commentary on the decline of social norms in Pakistan since Independence, purportedly in the name of religion. Women are predominantly impacted by the constraints of restrictive religious mandates that promote gender segregation.

The narrator also states that it was unsurprising for their most mundane interactions to assume a political dimension. In Pakistan, the interplay between martial law and religion significantly impacted many facets of daily life. The story recounts the pervasive sense of betrayal that engulfed the nation and how, repressed for thirteen years under martial control, their aspirations ascended "like genie" following Bhutto's electoral triumph. The restoration of democracy under Bhutto's progressive leadership instilled a sense of pride among Pakistanis, reintegrating them into the contemporary global society. This euphoria was ephemeral, as Bhutto failed to fulfil his commitments and summoned the military to oversee peace and order, ultimately resulting in his imprisonment and impending execution. Zareen discusses the liberation that Bhutto briefly introduced into their existence:

I was genuinely optimistic when Bhutto was elected. For the inaugural occasion, I  
perceived that my lack of Muslim identity and my gender were inconsequential.  
Do you recall when he instructed the ladies to join the men? That  
Required courage!"

The narrative illustrates how political transformations impact all facets of life in Pakistan and suggests that the economy consequently deteriorated. The story addresses the politics of religion, with Sidhwa highlighting how fundamentalism represents a fresh and intolerant kind of faith on a subcontinent where several religious groups have coexisted for generations. Zareen venerates the shrine of the Muslim saint Data Gunj Baksh, notwithstanding her devotion as a Zoroastrian. The narrator states:

Considering the diverse array of religions that coexist in close proximity in the  
the subcontinent and the spiritual impetus that nourishes its inhabitants  
All religions congregate at one another's shrines and churches. They arrived  
visited the mausoleum of the fifteenth-century Sufi from around Pakistan, and  
Prior to the Partition, they originated from various regions of northern India.

This underscores the incongruity of religious extremism in an area where tolerance has been customary. The narrative also underscores that religion is sometimes misconstrued by political entities to fulfil the unethical agendas of politicians.

The novel depicts the overarching political landscape in the country subsequent to Bhutto's detention, along with the populace's apprehensions over the imposition of martial law. The widespread outrage at the arrest, the apprehensions over his fate, and the dismay at his eventual execution despite global appeals for clemency are all documented in the story. The author intertwines imaginary and historical figures while depicting the Bhutto.

The family and the democratic, liberal, humanitarian visage they imparted to the nation. At the shrine of the Muslim saint, Zareen and Feroza encounter Bhutto's sister, who is also present to pray. The crowd's reaction to Bhutto's sister's suffering clearly illustrates that politics and political people are integral to the fabric of subcontinental life.

A group of guys exclaimed, "Bhutto Zindabad." ..and old women, bandy clad in their baggy shalwars, exhibiting laborious, crab-like motions, ascended the steps to touch his sister's hands with their calloused fingers  
Shawl with inscription, "We pray for your brother." Do not worry, he will be complimentary.

This episode highlights the nation's urgent need for a saviour to alleviate their suffering, epitomised in post-Partition Pakistan by Bhutto and his progressive ideals. The reactions of the minority Parsi group to these major political changes and their paranoia on the increased Islamization of the country are explicitly described. Feroza, a student, is perplexed by the political discourse that transpired during dinner parties and gatherings, including Bhutto's actions and transgressions, Zia's Islamization of state institutions, and the anticipated outcome of the Bhutto trial verdict. Her conduct is influenced, prompting Zareen to decide to move her to America.

The impending execution of Bhutto looms significantly over the plot, as Indian journalist-novelist Khushwant Singh comes in Lahore to document the hanging, where reality and fiction intertwine once again. In America, Feroza discovers that she possesses a far more political awareness than the typical American, who is unable to recognise any nation beyond the United States. She perceives in her flatmate the archetypal American who accepts as truth all that is shown on television, without scrutinising the news, unlike Feroza and the majority of individuals from the Third World, who view life in connection to the global context.

In contrast to the Third World citizen directly impacted by the actions of the dominant USA and the former USSR, which oppressed weaker states, the average American remains indifferent to the broader political turmoil affecting vast populations far from her. Sidhwa notes that in Pakistan, politics engages all individuals—from street sweepers to business tycoons—due to its personal impact on everyone, especially women. The work serves as a poignant denunciation of the exploitation of Asian nations by the dominant West.

The novel acknowledges the liberties afforded to South Asian migrants in the United States, although it critiques the American press for its skewed reporting on Third World issues, which is naively accepted by the typical American. Sidhwa remarks on American policy, stating: Feroza, like to her parents, has a politically astute and restless intellect. ...Residing with Jo and seeing television provided her with a troubling understanding of America's foreign policy and the fundamental rift at the center of the nation's political essence. ..was bifurcated into darkness and light, leaving little space for the ambiguity that other, older, and less affluent nations had learnt to embrace... the dissonance she discerned at the heart of America's relationship with its own inhabitants and with those in impoverished countries like hers persisted in unsettling her. She ultimately concluded that her distress stemmed from America's immense wealth and power, coupled with the glaring flaws of its dual standards and the blatant injustices it perpetrated. While Pakistan and other nations are not exemplary, there were no expectations for Pakistan to assert itself as a leader among nations or as a supreme arbiter of justice and human rights.

Rohinton Mistry's *Such a Long Journey* explores the Nagarvala Case, *A Fine Balance* portrays the internal Emergency instituted by Indira Gandhi, and *Family Matters* examines the repercussions of the Babri Masjid riots in the 1990s. This study analyses Mistry's indictment of the government's false promises and underscores the plight of regular citizens during the Emergency era in *A Fine Balance*. The Emergency resulted in the abrogation of basic rights conferred to Indian citizens by the Constitution.

The story encompasses the period from the proclamation of the Emergency in 1975 until the assassination of Indira Gandhi in 1984. Amidst this political context, Mistry intricately interlaces the lives of Dina Dalal, her tailors Ishwar and Omprakash Darji, and her lodger Maneck Kohlah. Their collective hardships in Mumbai during the Emergency exemplify the grim reality of existence under political persecution.

The Emergency, as shown by Mistry, is founded on the government's endeavours to undermine the law and maintain power by illicit means. In *A Fine Balance*, Mistry used the viewpoint of Avinash, a student union leader, to elucidate the fundamental causes of the Emergency. Avinash elucidates the political manipulation involved, asserting, "The Prime Minister was adjudicated guilty of electoral fraud." Rather than complying with the court's decree, she declared a state of emergency, transforming the situation into a mere spectacle of superficial manoeuvres, rather than a dynamic legal framework that fortifies societal structures. She suspended the Constitution and incarcerated dissenters. Through Avinash, Mistry underscores the government's urgency to maintain authority, illustrating how political corruption and lawlessness precipitated the decline of democracy during this era.

The book illustrates the current political landscape in the country while revealing existing caste disparities in India. Dukhi Mochi's narrative transports readers to the era of India's battle for freedom. The severity of the caste issue among Indians is seen in this episode. Dukhi is a member of the Chamaar people, whose traditional occupation involves the removal of corpses. The upper caste individuals cannot endure the reality that Dukhi has two sons, Ishvar and Narayan. They lament, "What is transpiring in the world?" Why are there two boys in the household of an untouchable, while none in ours? What might a Chamaar bequeath to his sons that would merit divine reward? There was an anomaly; the Law of Manu had been undermined." (FB 100). The subjugated individuals endured many human rights abuses for their existence.

Mistry has documented several of these occurrences in his work. Bhola, a Chamaar, had his left hand fingers severed for theft, which was unsubstantiated. The afflicted individuals were unable to object; instead, they had to resign themselves to the sentiment, "Bhola is fortunate... Last year, Chhagan lost his hand at the wrist." Identical rationale" (FB 96). In a separate occasion, Buddha's wife "declined to accompany the zamindar's son to the field, resulting in her head being shaved and her being paraded naked through the square" (FB 97). In the novel's society, the upper caste individuals usurp the law to demean the disadvantaged.

A meticulous examination of *A Fine Balance* demonstrates that individuals, despite their own afflictions, frequently subjugate others positioned below in the social structure. Dukhi's family, belonging to the Chamaar caste, faces considerable adversity and persecution. Nevertheless, within this marginalised group, Roopa, Dukhi's spouse, continues the same cycle of injustice by mistreating an individual from the Bhunghi community, seen as inferior to the Chamaars. Roopa's contempt is apparent when she declares, "I will not permit a filthy Bhunghi to handle my pots; they are

unclean!" This example underscores the entrenched caste system, wherein even those at the lowest socioeconomic strata want to dominate others, illustrating the widespread nature of caste-based oppression in Indian culture.

Rohinton Mistry and Bapsi Sidhwa utilise their books to examine the convergence of political dislocation, exile, and identity. Mistry's emphasis on the Emergency and the ethical decline of postcolonial India, with Sidhwa's portrayal of the Partition of India and its consequences, illustrates the profound impact of political turmoil on individuals and communities. The historical expulsion of the Parsi community from Persia serves as a poignant allegory for the individuals' experiences of estrangement and marginalisation amid contemporary political developments. Mistry and Sidhwa provide unique insights into exile, depicting it not just as physical displacement but as an emotional and psychological state that influences identity and belonging in a dynamic society.

#### Conclusion

In the works of Rohinton Mistry and Bapsi Sidhwa, exile is shown not just as a geographical or historical event, but as a psychological and moral state inherent to the postcolonial individual. Both authors convert the Parsi community's extensive history of migration into a literary metaphor for estrangement against a tumultuous political environment. Their literature places human identities inside larger national crises—Partition, tyranny, religious nationalism, and the decline of democratic ideals—showing how political instability makes people feel even more lost and divides communities.

Mistry's *A Fine Balance* gives a broad picture of India during the Emergency, showing how the government controls the lives of everyday people. Mistry creates a little world of tyranny via the characters Dina Dalal, Ishvar, Om, and Maneck, where social hierarchy, government corruption, and the ethics of survival all come together. The book criticises the concept of postcolonial development by showing how societal institutions based on caste and power keep injustice going. Dukhi Mochi's family story shows how caste-based injustice continues to dehumanise people, showing that independence didn't free the poor but rather changed the names of earlier kinds of slavery to bureaucratic oppression. The Emergency is both a historical event and a symbol of how freedom is being taken away from people. It is a condition of internal exile when the law itself helps to keep people down.

In *An American Brat*, Bapsi Sidhwa, on the other hand, puts her criticism across boundaries, showing how moving to the West may be a form of exile. Sidhwa examines the tensions between Western modernism and Eastern conservatism via Feroza's trip from Pakistan to America. General Zia-ul-Haq's Islamization of Pakistan turns even private life into a political struggle. This shows how religious authoritarianism hurts women and minorities the most. The novel's political critique, along with themes of feminine awareness and diasporic adaptation, brings attention to the "feminisation of history," which is a way of telling stories that puts women's lived experiences at the center of historical discourse. Feroza's path mirrors the collective Parsi struggle: from historical persecution to contemporary marginalisation and ultimately to deliberate departure towards the West—each stage imbued with shame, yearning, and cultural hybridity.

The coming together of Mistry's and Sidhwa's works shows that exile may be both a protest and a prophecy. Their main characters deal with the conflict between belonging and not belonging, as well as between hereditary memory and experienced experience. The Parsi diaspora, which was a sign of integration during British colonial authority, becomes a symbol of the isolation of all minorities caught up in postcolonial nation-building after Partition. The socio-political crises of the subcontinent—such as India's Emergency or Pakistan's Islamization—serve as crucibles for testing, redefining, or fracturing identity.

In the end, Mistry and Sidhwa show that postcolonial freedom is an illusion. In their stories, independence from colonialism does not mean justice or equality; instead, it leads to new kinds of internal exile. The moral essence of their literature is in empathy for the marginalised, the bewildered, and the silent. By using the voice of the displaced, they remind readers that exile is not only something that happens to refugees or minorities; it is a universal metaphor for the human yearning for belonging in a world that isn't fair. Their literary worldview asserts that identity, like to exile, is perpetually fluid—it represents an ongoing negotiation among history, memory, and resistance.

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