Rohinton Mistry's Indo-Nostalgia in *Such a Long Journey* and *A Fine Balance* as Monochromatic Photographs of Mumbai

Shaival Thakkar

> If we do look back, we must also do so in the knowledge… that we will create fictions, not actual cities or villages but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, India of the mind.
>
> —Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands*

This paper, through a three-part argument, will demonstrate that the author constructs the fictional Mumbai in *Such a Long Journey* (1991) and *A Fine Balance* (1995) through the intermingling of cityscapes, character perspectives on Mumbai, and the author's own experience of Mumbai as a lived space. It will also show how these descriptions of Indo-Nostalgia take on the qualities of monochromatic photographs.Extensive research work has been done by Mistry scholars on many aspects of his work. His creative corpus has been analysed as diasporic discourse (Bharucha) and as diasporic consciousness (Negi). Representation in *Such a Long Journey* and spaces of city and nation in *A Fine Balance* (Morey), morality in *A Fine Balance* (Mani), politics, the local and the universal in his fiction (Bhautoo-Dewnarain), theme and technique in *Such a Long Journey* (Hemalatha) and the technique of neorealism in his fiction (Takhar) too have been examined. However, there has been almost no work done exclusively on Mistry's nostalgic depiction of the city of Mumbai, especially in the two novels, *Such a Long Journey* and *A Fine Balance* together.

One essay that comes close to the trajectory of this paper is "Mistry's Bombay: Harmony in Disparity" (2012). This article discusses Mistry's portrayal of the city of Bombay as a unique locale in India and endorses his fiction's success in representing a multi-ethnic and secular India. The author takes examples from all four Mistry books, compares the Mumbai of Mistry's childhood to the London of Dickens' childhood and thus forms conclusions about the image of Mumbai in Mistry's fiction (Elmadda). However, Elmadda's article focuses more on *Tales from Firozsha Baagh* (1987) and *Family Matters* (2001). The article generally examines Mumbai in Mistry's works without using any literary theory to probe deeper and it reads more like a feature article rather than a rigorously researched article. This research paper too will investigate the portrayal of Mumbai; however, it will also question its aesthetics and ask: How does Rohinton Mistry's writing evoke Indo-nostalgia in *Such a Long*

Journey and *A Fine Balance*? As its critical framework, this research paper will consult Henri Lefebvre's concept of lived space from the book *The Production of Space* (1974) and Susan Sontag's theory on photography from her book *On Photography* (1977). It will also refer to the semiotic aspect of constructionist approach to representation as theorised in Stuart Hall's essay "The Work of Representation" (1997).

Cityscapes

Mumbai consists of seven islands which were at first inhabited by fishing communities. From the second century BCE to the ninth century CE, the islands were ruled by many indigenous dynasties. In the mid-sixteenth century, Mumbai was a part of the Mughal Empire but later came under the control of the Portuguese. During the seventeenth century, the islands came under the possession of the British Empire, which in turn leased them to the British East India Company. In the eighteenth century, the Marathas conquered parts of Mumbai from the Portuguese but were later on defeated by the British who by then had complete control over the entire city. Mumbai became the capital of the Bombay Presidency area. In 1947, when India achieved independence, the Bombay Presidency was restructured into Bombay State. In 1960, Bombay State was separated into Gujarat and Maharashtra on a linguistic basis whereby Mumbai became the capital of Maharashtra.

In *A Fine Balance*, throughout the novel, Mumbai is only poetically referred to with a geographical metonym; City by the Sea. In the novel, Mumbai is constructed with signifiers such as the overcrowded Mumbai local train, the Vishram Vegetarian Hotel, the Indian courthouse, Dina Dalal's flat, the Bombay Rent Act, and informal housing and slums. These signifiers are all either generic or fictional in nature. However, they succeed in signifying the city of Mumbai, although it is never explicitly mentioned by its name, nor are any places within the city name-checked. Mumbai is not the only centre, yet it is central to the narrative. It can be said that Mistry is attempting a panoramic shot of India which contains Mumbai along with the village, the town and the hills as they represent India as well. Mumbai is shown to be a place of greater goodness, urbanity, opportunity, progress, and hope where overwhelming rural issues like casteism, violence, poverty, and unemployment can be contained.

Mumbai's cityscapes are in deep focus in the novel *Such a Long Journey*. Parsis in Mumbai live in Parsi colonies such as Dadar Parsee colony, Cursow Baug, Rustom Baugh, Malcolm Baug, Tata blocks in Bandra and Khodadad building. Mistry constructs a Parsi locale in the novel by making his Parsi characters the residents of Khodadad building who are an array of odd, interesting and endearing characters which keep the readers engaged. The

majority of the protagonist Gustad Noble's life, his domestic trials and triumphs all take place in Khodadad building.

One South Mumbai market included in the novel is Chor Bazaar. In an intriguing letter by his friend Major Jimmy Billimoria, Gustad is requested to go to Chor Bazaar and collect a parcel from there. He has no choice but to go there as he wants to help his friend. Gustad has a childhood association with Chor Bazaar too as he nostalgically remembers going there as a child with his father to buy a Meccano set. The letter had instructed him to look through *Othello* in *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*. As he is reading the line 'Put money in thy purse' underlined in red, he is handed a parcel. On opening the parcel at home, he sees that it contains 10 lakh rupees (*SLJ* 91-92, 99-106).

The novel also features Crawford Market, which is one of South Mumbai's most famous markets. Gustad Noble and his family had a long association with Crawford Market. His father used to go to Crawford market with a servant to buy mutton, always arriving and leaving in a taxi. However, Gustad was not as affluent as his father. He could only afford to buy beef or chicken and travelled in buses. He always thought of the Crawford Market as dirty, smelly and overcrowded. Besides, his grandmother had told him as a child to beware of the butcher's knife. This too had coloured his perception of the Crawford Market. During his college days, Gustad's college friend Malcolm Saldhana had taken him to the Crawford Market and taught him how to buy the best quality beef from there at affordable rates. Gustad re-visits the Crawford Market as a family man as well because he has to buy chicken for his daughter who is ill and has been advised to drink chicken soup (*SLJ* 18, 20-26, 219). When the researcher visited the Crawford Market in Mumbai in 2014, he found it to be such a busy and crowded place that it was more of a transactional space than a space that one can be nostalgic about. However, most likely the Crawford Market of the 1970s was a less-peopled, slower and a quieter place which Mistry has captured in his novel.

The Towers of Silence, which Gustad visits on two occasions, both for funerals, is an aspect of Mumbai which makes Gustad reflective, nostalgic about his parents and grandparents and philosophical about life's journeys (*SLJ* 254). Mistry shows the last rites and rituals as a profoundly spiritual experience. Stuart Hall, while talking about the constructionist approach to representation explains that the process of representation applies to things found in the material world, however, "we also form concepts of rather obscure and abstract things, which we can't in any simple way see, feel or touch" (17). It is a well-known fact that non-Parsis are not allowed to enter the Towers of Silence. By choosing the Towers of Silence as one of the signifiers which constructs Mumbai in the novel, Mistry represents something "we have never seen, and possibly can't or

won't ever see" (Hall 17) and makes known how the Parsi funeral rites take place. Correspondingly, Susan Sontag in *On Photography* reflects, "…photography's program of realism… implies… the belief that reality is hidden. And, being hidden, is something to be unveiled. Whatever the camera records is a disclosure– whether it is imperceptible, fleeting…or simply the elliptical way of seeing" (94). Mistry's descriptions of the Towers of Silence, like a photograph, reveal something which is unseen and give his readers an exposure to an aspect of India that they are probably unacquainted with.

The Basilica of Our Lady of the Mount, more commonly known as Mount Mary Church, is a Roman Catholic Basilica located in Bandra. It is said that those who sincerely pray at the Mount Mary Church often get their wishes fulfilled. Wax figures of the Virgin Mary, along with an assortment of candles shaped like hands, feet and various other parts of the body are sold at kiosks. The sick and the suffering choose a candle or wax figure that corresponds to their ailment and light it in Church, with the pious hope that Mother Mary will consider their appeals for help.

Gustad's college friend Malcolm Saldanha takes him to Mount Mary Church. There Gustad buys four candles and appropriate wax statues: A girl's torso for curing Roshan's illness, a full body of wax to cure Dinshawji's cancer, a boy's head to make Sohrab change his mind and a wax leg to help Gustad improve his hip which limps sometimes (*SLJ* 227). Mistry in his novels also name-checks several places which are quintessentially Mumbai such as Lamington Road, Flora Fountain, Bandra, Dadar station, Chaupatty, Marine Drive, Carnac Road, Sleater Road, and the Hanging Gardens.

Mistry encodes the novelistic space of Mumbai by encrypting Khodadad building as a dramatic residential place for eccentric Parsis, Crawford Market as a nostalgic space which reminds the protagonist of his family's collapse from affluence to middle-class and Chor Bazaar as an intriguing, detective-esque space infused with a bit of childhood nostalgia. In addition, the Towers of Silence and Mount Mary Church are encoded as spiritual cityscapes; the former is largely encrypted as a space of loss and philosophical reflections while the latter is encoded as a space for hope and prayer.

Character Perspectives on Mumbai

An important aspect of Mumbai in *Such a Long Journey* is the Mumbai of nostalgia for the past; of childhood and youth. Like the Crawford Market in Mumbai, thoughts about the loss of his father's bookstore makes Gustad Noble reminisce about his family's former prosperity.

The smell of old books and bindings, learning, and wisdom floated out. On

the top shelf, at the rear, were E. Cobham Brewer's *Dictionary of Phrase and Fable* and the two volumes of Barrère and Leland's *Dictionary of Slang, Jargon & Cant*, the 1897 edition. Like the furniture, Gustad had rescued these from his father's bankrupt bookstore. Reaching in, he pulled out Brewer's Dictionary and opened it at random. He held it up to his nose and closed his eyes. The rich, timeless fragrance rose from the precious pages, soothing his uneasy, confused spirit. He shut the book, tenderly stroking its spine with the back of his fingers, and replaced it on the shelf. (*SLJ* 53)

It was in 1995 that the city's name changed from Bombay to Mumbai. However, *Such a Long Journey* was published in 1991. In spite of being published four years before the name change, the novel shows awareness of the political changes taking place in the city. Gustad Noble's friend and co-worker, Dinshawji expresses his anger at the loss of his personal history as the names of the streets have been changed by Shiv Sena. He says:

> Names are so important. I grew up on Lamington Road. But it has disappeared; in its place is Dadasaheb Bhadkhamkar Marg. My school was on Carnac Road. Now suddenly it's on Lokmanya Tilak Marg... And one fine day the name changes. So what happens to the life I have lived? Was I living the wrong life, with all the wrong names? Will I get a second chance to live it all again, with these new names? Tell me what happens to my life. Rubbed out, just like that? Tell me! (*SLJ* 74)

The writer T. J. S. George's thoughts in his article "Nostalgia over the Glory Days of Bombay" (2012), are evocative of those of the character Dinshawji, when he says:

> No city arouses nostalgic sadness as much as Mumbai does. Other cities might have changed names, like Kolkata, or grown beyond recognition, like Bangalore, to the chagrin of old timers. Bombay not only changed its name; it lost its character, its élan, the creativity and cosmopolitanism that made it the urbs prima in Indies in the first two decades of Independence. Mumbai was built over the dead soul of Bombay. (George)

In *A Fine Balance*, the character Dina Dalal's parents pass away, one after the other, leaving her brother and his wife in charge of her life. The city becomes a refuge for Dina whose domestic life has become very stifling:

> Dina preferred to spend as much time out of the house as possible. Her resources for her outings were limited to what she could squeeze from the shopping money…The savings were sufficient to pay for bus fares. Dina went to parks, wandered in museums and markets,

> visited cinemas… Dina noticed in the lobby a young man…They stood close together, watching the fine needles of rain slanting in the light of the streetlamp…It was hard to let go when the bus came. (*AFB* 29-34)

Sontag discusses the typical subjects in photographs, "Photographs show people being so irrefutably there and a specific age in their lives; group together people and things which a moment later have already disbanded, changed, continued along the course of their independent destinies" (54-55). Photographs and descriptions both have strong narrative powers, and both have the ability to elicit nostalgia in a reader. It is an engrossing intersection of words and photography when Mistry uses a school photograph to recount how it triggers nostalgia in Dina Dalal and her school friend Zenobia:

> All that evening, they enjoyed the pleasure of reminiscing, laughing at the follies and tragedies of their past. Very often there was a little sadness in their laughter, for these memories were of their youth...They calculated how old they would have been in the sixth standard, when they had started French, and the French teacher, who they had nicknamed Mademoiselle Bouledogue, began terrorizing their lives three times a week. (*AFB* 202)

Their nostalgic contemplations continue when Zenobia brings their class photo of 1949 to Dina Dalal next evening. With the help of the photograph Dina recollects Aban Sodawallah as the girl with a beauty spot for which the girls used to tease her and later the girls tried to imitate the beauty spot themselves. Most girls lost touch after school and went their own ways in life. Some went to college, some joined work and some were not allowed to go to college as it was seen as a bad influence for soon-to-be wives and mothers (*AFB* 203-204). Dina Dalal fondly recalls the pleasures of her short-lived freedom and romance in the early Mumbai as a young woman, with her paying guest Maneck, before disproportionate migration took its toll on the island city:

> ...those enchanted evenings of musical recitals, and emerging with Rustom from the concert hall into the fragrant night when the streets were quiet – yes, she said, in those days the city was still beautiful, the footpaths were clean, not yet taken over by pavement-dwellers, and yes, the stars were visible in the sky in those days, when Rustom and she walked along the sea, listening to the endless exchange of the waves, or in the Hanging Gardens, among the whispering trees, planning their wedding and their lives, planning and plotting in full ignorance of destiny's plan for them. (*AFB* 336)

Like the meaning encoded in the novels through different cityscapes, the

perspectives of the characters on Mumbai by Gustad Noble, Dinshawji and Dina Dalal also become signifiers which construct Mumbai. In *Such a Long Journey*, the perspectives of characters construct the rueful city of a middle-class Parsi man longing for a more comfortable past and a veteran citizen who is anguished at the politics which is hastily reconceiving his much-loved city. On the other hand, the nostalgia in *A Fine Balance* is that of a woman, Dina Dalal, whose agency is limited to begin with because of her gender. However, she cherishes Mumbai in fragments and relishes the little refuge, friendships, girlhood memories, freedom, romance and splendour that the city afforded her.

Mistry further constructs Mumbai as a nostalgic space by using artefacts, places and sensory perceptions. It is the description of artefacts such as old books, furniture, movie posters and school photographs; places such as roads, parks, museums, markets, public libraries, old reading rooms, music rooms in library, concert and recital spaces in the city, and sensory perceptions such as smell of old books and the sound of familiar street names which evokes nostalgia in the reader when she reads them.

Mumbai as Author's Lived Space

Henri Lefebvre's conceptualisation of the spatial triad: perceived space, conceived space, and lived space from *The Production of Space* (1974) has been very influential in understanding spatiality. He believed that "space should be seen as the site of ongoing interactions of social relations" (Zhang 219). Fictionalisation of Mumbai in a novel can be understood as a "representational space" which is defined as "space… directly *lived* through its associated images and symbols, and hence the space of 'inhabitants' and 'users', but also of some artists and… a few writers and philosophers, who *describe*…" (Lefebvre 39). Angela Lambert's article "Touched with Fire" (2002) for *The Guardian* reveals how his fictional Mumbai was influenced by England as a representational space in the books he read:

> From this early reading he got the impression of an England that both mirrored and glamourised the reality; a country where confident, laughing children shared exciting adventures with a bouncy, barking dog while their elder sisters flirted languidly over tea on the lawn and their parents conducted wars of attrition with servants and tradesmen. Mistry knows this innocent sunlit England never really existed, but just as the Bombay of his novels is a literary construct, so was that England: part wishful thinking, part imagination and part truth. (Lambert)

While describing the characteristics of representational spaces, Lefebvre says, "Representational space is alive: it speaks. It has an affective kernel or centre: Ego, bed, bedroom, dwelling, house; or: square, church, graveyard" (42).

Rohinton Mistry's younger brother Cyrus Mistry, a writer and playwright in *The Guardian* article corroborates the veracity of his fictional Mumbai as a representational space, "To the extent that Rohinton's novels are about Parsees, he is chronicling a vanishing world. His picture is accurate" (Lambert).

Representational spaces describe not only space but also time. Lefebvre states that a representational space, "embraces the loci of passion, of action and of lived situations, and thus immediately implies time. Consequently, it may be qualified in various ways: it may be directional, situational or relational, because it is essentially qualitative, fluid and dynamic" (42). While elaborating on the time-period aspect of his representational spaces, Mistry says:

> I would say my Bombay is rooted in fact, but I'm writing about a city that has disappeared. In 1975, when I left, its population was less than half what it is today, and that transforms a city in unimaginable ways. If I'd never left I would have adjusted and learned the mechanisms for coping, as the other 14 million inhabitants have. Today when I go back I feel like a marathon runner who's no longer in training. (Lambert)

Lived space can be understood as "a space of pure subjectivity, of human experiences, of people's sense-making, imagination, and feeling – that is, their local knowledge– of the organisational space as they encounter it" (Zhang 221). Mistry, partly, traces the epistemology of his fictional Mumbai back to his experience of Mumbai as a lived space: "Part of the tragedy of the educated middle classes in Bombay was this yearning for something unattainable that came from what they had read. Would that sense of a future elsewhere have been avoided if we had concentrated on an Indian literary canon? I don't know" (Lambert).

Mistry's Indo-Nostalgia as Monochromatic Photographs of Mumbai

In her book, *On Photography*, Susan Sontag talks about photographs as a captured experience, photographs as reality in miniature and about photograph's function of documenting beauty and truth (2, 79, 87). About the role of the photographer she says, "From the start, photographers...set themselves the task of recording a disappearing world..." (59). It is a known fact that the Parsi population in India and the world over is declining. Due to this, a community with a unique identity and culture is vanishing gradually. Mistry, in his descriptions of his Mumbai, shares the same concerns as many photographers. Mistry states "when the Parsis have disappeared from the face of earth, his writing will preserve a record of how they lived, to some extent" (qtd. in Bharucha 59).

Although both photography and novelistic descriptions are different

mediums, they can be both used effectively as tools for story-telling. Both can also be said to have a language of their own. "Any sound, word, image or object which functions as a sign, and is organised with other signs into a system which is capable of carrying and expressing meaning is…a language" (Hall 19). The basic structure of a sentence in English consists of subject-verb-object. Similarly, the basic structure of the language of photography is based on elements such as "light, time, composition, object and subject" (Rogers 7).

Rohinton Mistry's Indo-Nostalgic descriptions in *Such a Long Journey* and *A Fine Balance* lend themselves to comparison with monochromatic photographs of Mumbai because like monochrome images they are suggestive of time-periods, places, people, relationships, artefacts, experiences and emotions that are gone or are in the process of fading away. Susan Sontag says, "When we are nostalgic, we take pictures…photographs actively promote nostalgia. Photography is an elegiac art, a twilight art. Most subjects photographed are, just by the virtue of being photographed, touched with pathos" (11). Resembling photographs, Mistry's descriptions too have a melancholic quality about them and his writing when he recalls the past resonates with pathos. Mistry's descriptions of Mumbai are aesthetically suggestive of monochrome photography as they, identical to monochrome photography, are exceptionally artistic, very well crafted, make the reader experience a heightened state of emotion and create an intimacy between the reader and the city as well as characters.

Such a Long Journey is set in the background of the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971 and *A Fine Balance* has as its background The Emergency period of 1975-77. The political tracks in both these novels have been acclaimed for their realistic representations. However, it is the characters, their relationships with each other as well as the city, and the emotions they experienced during those times which render the characters as well-rounded figures who in turn bring alive the political realities of those times.

"With the removal of color you reveal the essence of things" and "end up in a reality that is more real and closer to what we essentially experience" (Tjintjelaar). Like a black and white photographer, Mistry is also known for his minimalist writing style, which makes his work very relatable for his readers and communicates his messages directly without any verbiage or superfluousness.

A photographer may choose to have a career exclusively in black and white photography. Similarly, Mistry by always making the creative choice of only writing about the city of Mumbai and that too the bygone Mumbai (his fictional oeuvre covers the time-span from 1971 to circa 2002), he can be equated to a monochrome photographer who finds it more imperative to

document a certain place and time, rather than the contemporary Mumbai or modern-day Canada. In *The Guardian* article, Bruce Westwood, Mistry's Canadian literary agent says, "Rohinton has been a Canadian citizen and resident of Toronto for 27 years now. He has lived here for longer than he lived in India, but his books are still set in the Bombay of his youth, reinvented with perfect recall. At times he seems to have idealised it into a childhood paradise, like Nabokov's Russia" (Lambert).

Monochrome photographs are usually associated with the past because they originated before the invention of the colour photograph. So even now, while re-creating the past creatively in a film or a book, monochrome photography is used to achieve a retrospective effect. Mistry creates the retrospective effect masterfully in his fiction. Mistry's aesthetic achievement lies in the fact that his descriptions of Mumbai render time elastic and bring alive the past. His characters in the two novels, Gustad Noble and Dina Dalal are adults in 1970s Mumbai. Their nostalgic reveries are about their childhood and youth which happened at least two or more decades into the past. So, reading Mistry in the 21st century makes one take a profound, affectionate, wonder-filled gaze into what it would be like to be a child growing up in Mumbai circa 1949. It also makes the reader speculate about the pleasures and pains experienced by adolescents during that time period.

Although there are many authors who have written stories about Mumbai, Mistry has a signature style of writing about Mumbai. His creative choices; of writing about certain political events, the Parsi community, the time-periods in which his novels are set as well his writing style; minimalism and directness in writing, realism, contrasting of tenderness in interpersonal relationships to the harshness of the political events on people, elegiac, emotive, and haunting use of language, photographic descriptions of places, exploration of the past-life of his characters and the sporadic reappearances of that past, and documenting of the minor and major truths and splendours of the city make his work distinctive from that of other writers. Mistry's creativity and stylistics not only make his work comparable to monochromatic photographs, but he can also be equated to a photographer auteur.

The cityscapes and the character perspectives and especially nostalgia are imbued with essentialism contributing to a particular Mumbai which is part Parsi and part diasporic. Mistry, in representing Mumbai in his novels, is creating a particularised figure of the city which is constructed through the language used, cityscapes foregrounded, and perspectives of the characters regarding political events and its aftermath. Nostalgia opens up a signifying field where the performativity of the language as well as human life is acted out. Interviews

with the author and his contemporaries corroborate the fact that his fictional Mumbai is a literary construct of the 1970s Mumbai. A largely Parsi Mumbai; it is a skilful weaving together of Mumbai which is partly factual and partly imagination. This Mumbai was inspired by the books from the Western literary canon Mistry read as a child as well as by his experience of Mumbai as a lived space, up until he was in his early 20s, before he migrated to Canada.

The English novelist Graham Greene, in his introduction to the novel *The Bachelor of Arts*, appreciated R. K. Narayan's fictional Malgudi and said about him: "Narayan… wakes in me a spring of gratitude, for he has offered me a second home. Without him I could never have known what it is like to be Indian" (Greene).

One can say, with similar gratitude, that Rohinton Mistry's reflective Indo-nostalgia and longing for his childhood and adulthood provides his readers "a second home" in Mumbai and allows his reader to experience the beauty of the 1970s Mumbai through his beautiful, emotive, nostalgic and monochromatic descriptions of the city. Mistry creates a magical literary nostalgia shop in his novels which a space where his readers can engage with the literary memories and dwell in the imagined space of the 1970s Mumbai; a mental image of India; where the descriptions of places are in black-and-white, desires are in sepia, smells are ripened by time, sounds are resonant of a long-gone era and the memories are vintage.

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