Reconstructing Belonging: Home as a Social Construct in the Select Works of Rohinton Mistry

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Abstract

This paper examines the social construction of "home" in Rohinton Mistry's three major novels — Such a Long Journey, A Fine Balance, and Family Matters. Arguing that Mistry stages home primarily as a set of social relations, obligations, and moral economies rather than a simple physical shelter, the study shows how family duties, communal rituals, class relations and public events produce and test belonging. Close readings of domestic scenes, community interactions, and public intrusions demonstrate that belonging in Mistry's fiction is negotiated through social practices and obligations. The paper situates this social reading alongside postcolonial and diasporic theories to show how Mistry's humanism illuminates the social mechanics of home in contexts of urban precarity and political instability.

Keywords: home, belonging, Rohinton Mistry, community, family, diaspora

Introduction

The literary category of "home" is fluid. Across critical traditions it functions as physical space, psychological site and social institution. Postcolonial and diasporic critics (Said, Bhabha, Rushdie) emphasize dislocation, cultural hybridity and memory; sociological approaches bring into focus kinship, obligation and social capital. Rohinton Mistry's fiction is particularly productive for a combined approach: set in urban India and attentive to the vicissitudes of community life, his novels repeatedly stage scenes in which belonging is produced through social labor — care, reciprocity, ritual participation, and neighborly assistance — rather than merely through possession of property or physical shelter. This paper reads Such a Long Journey (1991), A Fine Balance (1995), and Family Matters (2002) with the aim of reconstructing home as a social construct: a space created, maintained, and contested by webs of relationships, public events, and moral expectations.

Review of scholarship and theoretical frame

Critical commentary on Mistry emphasizes his realism, empathy for the marginalized, and moral imagination. Studies tend to highlight politics, diaspora, memory and narrative ethics; fewer works isolate the social fabric of domesticity as the primary engine of belonging. To fill that gap the present study borrows from social theory (Robert Putnam on social capital; anthropological accounts of kinship and reciprocity) and postcolonial theory (Bhabha on

liminality and cultural hybridity; Said on exile and public trauma) to argue that home in Mistry is socially produced: an effect of reciprocal obligations, community judgments and ritual belonging.

Methodology

The paper uses close reading of representative scenes and sequences from the three novels, reading them against social-theoretical concepts. Emphasis is on how narrative detail — from meals and gossip to funeral rites and neighborhood gatherings — constructs networks of reciprocal obligation that constitute "home." The approach privileges textual evidence, brief quotations and contextual interpretation.

Such a Long Journey: home as civic-communal field

Gustad Noble's life is enmeshed in a network of social roles: father, clerk, friend, community elder. Mistry represents his domestic life as continuously intersecting with neighborhood and civic life. A key pattern is the way public shame and reputation shape private choices: Gustad's decisions are frequently governed by concern for communal standing and neighborly expectations. Family and friends are not merely private supporters but public witnesses whose opinions count. The social texture of home is visible in recurring scenes of communal conversation, neighbors gathering to drink tea, and the competitive, judgmental gaze of others that governs family behavior. Thus home is not isolated privacy; it is an extension of the social field.

Moreover, the intrusion of political corruption in the novel demonstrates that public forces can permeate and destabilize domestic life. The moral crises faced by Gustad are social rather than purely personal—his dilemmas involve obligations to friends, expectations of honor, and reputational survival. Mistry thereby implicates the larger social formation in the making and unmaking of home.

A Fine Balance: poverty, networks and makeshift homes

A Fine Balance dramatizes the fragility of domestic security under authoritarian and economic pressures. Maneck, Ishvar and Om navigate precarious housing, exploitative labor and hostile bureaucracies. Their "homes" are often temporary — rented rooms, shared spaces — yet social bonds convert such precariousness into shared survival mechanisms. The novel repeatedly shows neighbors stepping into one another's lives, sharing meals and protection. These informal networks perform the social labor of "home" when structural access to secure housing fails.

Caste and class also structure access to home: Ishvar and Om's marginalized status restricts their options, demonstrating how social hierarchy is embedded in domestic possibilities. The novel's communal scenes (public meals, shared laundries, neighborly bargaining) show that belonging emerges from day-to-day mutual aid as much as from kinship. In such conditions, the social construction of home becomes a strategy of survival: a collective response to systemic instability.

Family Matters: elder care, duty and moral economy

Family Matters turns attention to intrafamilial obligations: caregiving, financial responsibility, and property disputes. Nariman's illness and dependence foreground familial duty as the defining feature of home. Mistry gives extended attention to caregiving labor—the unpaid emotional and physical work that secures the elder's daily life. The home, then, is a moral economy: duties and reciprocal expectations create a web of belonging that defines family identity.

At the same time, Mistry exposes tensions: care can be burdensome; property can corrode affection; moral duty can become coercion. The social construction of home is therefore ambivalent—binding and humane but also potentially suffocating. By focusing on intergenerational obligations and the social rules that regulate them, Family Matters reveals home as simultaneously the repository of affection and the arena of social duty.

Rituals, public events and permeability of home

Across the three novels rituals (religious gatherings, festivals, funerary rites) and public events (political crises, economic shocks) perform two functions: they publicly reaffirm community membership while also exposing boundaries of inclusion and exclusion. Ritual participation publicly marks belonging; absence from ritual life can be social ostracism. Festivals and public commemorations stitch individuals into a collective calendar that sustains identity beyond household walls. But when public crises (state violence, economic collapse) intrude, the durability of social bonds is tested. Mistry's fiction thus shows home as porous—shaped by ritual affirmation but vulnerable to public rupture.

Mistry's humanism and social ethics

Mistry's narrative stance invests ordinary social labor—caregiving, neighborliness, modest acts of generosity—with ethical weight. Reading Mistry alongside Bhabha and sociological accounts of reciprocity highlights that belonging is not merely sentimental but ethical: social obligations create moral claims and corresponding duties. The novelist's humanism draws attention to small acts that reproduce social life: sharing food, defending a neighbor, preserving family honor. These acts are the building blocks of home in Mistry's world.

Discussion: contributions and implications

By prioritizing the social construction of home, this study complements existing psychological and spatial interpretations. A social lens emphasizes reciprocity, normative expectation and collective rituals as generating belonging. For scholars of diaspora and urban studies, Mistry's novels offer empirical detail on how communities sustain life under stress. Methodologically, the approach suggests that literary analysis can profitably borrow sociological categories—social capital, moral economy—to explain how narrative worlds construct lived realities.

Conclusion

Rohinton Mistry's fiction reconstructs belonging as a social product. Whether in the civic anxieties of Such a Long Journey, the fragile solidarity of A Fine Balance, or the moral duties of Family Matters, home appears as the outcome of social practices—care, ritual, reciprocal aid, and communal judgment. This study contends that a full understanding of home in diasporic literature must account for these social mechanics: Mistry's novels show us that belonging is produced in relations, enacted in duties, and contested when public pressures intrude. For BRABU scholars and wider readers, the social reading enables a richer appreciation of how literature represents the ordinary acts that make life habitable.

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