

Lost in the Ruins: Identity, Memory, and Nostalgia in the Decline of Parsi Heritage in Cyrus Mistry's *Doongaji House*

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Cyrus Mistry, an acclaimed Indian playwright, novelist, and short story writer, is celebrated for his ability to craft poignant narratives that delve into the lives of marginalised communities and explore the erosion of cultural legacies. Born into a Parsi family, Mistry's works often draw from the socio-cultural history of his community, highlighting its rich traditions while grappling with the harsh realities of its declining influence in contemporary India. His literary voice shines a light on the complexities of identity, belonging, and cultural continuity, situating him as a vital figure in understanding the intersection of heritage and socio-political change.

Mistry's debut play, *Doongaji House*, written at the age of 21, earned him the Sultan Padamsee Award for Playwriting in 1978. The play is a reflection of the existential struggles faced by the Parsi community within the rapidly transforming urban landscape of Mumbai. At the heart of the narrative lies a decaying chawl. This chawl becomes a powerful metaphor for the broader disintegration of Parsi cultural and social identity. Once emblematic of the prosperity and affluence enjoyed under colonial rule, the chawl now reflects the community's socio-economic decline in independent India. Through the physical decay of this space, Mistry captures the anxieties of a once-thriving community now teetering on the edge of extinction.

The play also unravels intergenerational tensions, with the elder members struggling to hold onto cultural traditions while the younger generation grapples with modernity and adaptation. Hormusji Pochkhanwalla, the patriarch, embodies this crisis. His diminishing authority and relevance

underscore the erosion of familial bonds and communal coherence, mirroring the Parsi community's larger challenges. The play also sheds light on the growing disparity between wealthy and impoverished Parsis, touching on themes such as the degradation of living standards, socio-economic marginalization, and the rise of social vices.

By juxtaposing the chawl's physical decay with the community's struggle for cultural preservation amidst urban gentrification, Mistry raises critical questions about identity, place, and heritage. His nuanced portrayal of the Parsis' plight underscores how urbanization, economic dispossession, and social alienation fragment individual and collective identities. Through *Doongaji House*, Mistry poignantly captures the precarious balance between a nostalgic longing for the past and the inevitable challenges of modernity, marking it as a significant work in exploring cultural displacement and decline.

At the beginning of the play the deteriorating state of the titular *Doongaji House* powerfully mirrors the waning legacy of Parsi cultural heritage. The three-storeyed building, of which this is the second floor, itself shows alarming signs of age and degeneration. The walls, hung with portraits of family ancestors, are cracked and peeling. The vivid imagery of its crumbling walls and lack of basic amenities serves as a metaphor for the broader disintegration of a once-distinct identity, now struggling to endure in the face of rapid urbanization. This physical decay parallels the challenges the Parsi community faces in preserving their unique cultural identity within a city increasingly characterized by economic pressures and cultural homogenization.

In this way, *Doongaji House* becomes a microcosm of the Parsi community's historical and cultural identity. The building's decline and eventual destruction poignantly reflect the effects of urbanization and gentrification in Mumbai. These forces contribute to what Edward Said refers to as the "loss of locality," both in a literal sense—through the destruction of the chawl—and in a metaphorical sense, through the gradual erosion of Parsi heritage and the weakening of community ties.

Urban Decay, Gentrification, and Economic Marginalization as metaphors for Cultural Decline and Social Stigma.

The destruction of Doongaji House is emblematic of this struggle, highlighting both the physical dislocations and the symbolic erasures that accompany the transformation of urban spaces. Urbanization plays a significant role in reshaping the socio-economic realities of minority communities. In Mumbai, the Parsis, who were historically integral to the city's cultural and economic fabric, find themselves sidelined by gentrification and changing demographic dynamics. The dilapidated state of Doongaji House and the characters' inability to afford basic repairs serve as a microcosm of this larger process, symbolizing how urban transformation can displace minority communities both physically and economically.

As Edward Said observes: "For the native, the history of colonial servitude is inaugurated by the loss of the locality to the outsider; its recovery is motivated by resistance to the outsider, followed by a search for an independent identity" (*Culture and Imperialism*, Ch.1). While the Parsis cannot be strictly classified as a colonized group, their experiences align with Said's insights. As a minority community shaped and constrained by colonial and postcolonial forces, they have witnessed a gradual marginalization of their cultural and spatial identity. Their shrinking presence in Mumbai reflects the broader postcolonial struggles of minority communities negotiating their place amidst shifting urban and national narratives.

The theme of economic marginalization in Doongaji House also plays a pivotal role in shaping the narrative's tensions and conflicts, particularly as it intersects with the social stigmatization of the Parsi community. Piroja's reflection—"PIROJA: *Two years since our wiring rotted. I've grown so used to this lamp, I think it will hurt my eyes if we ever get back our lights. But I miss the fan*" (Mistry 80-81) evokes a profound sense of resignation and adaptation to declining living conditions. This mundane yet poignant statement underscores the inescapable material realities of economic decline, which mirror the broader socio-

economic struggles of a minority community grappling with its diminishing status.

Hormusji: When Bombay first got electricity— 1928, I think— ours was one of the first buildings to install a meter. You know, Avan? It was the tallest building around for miles ... At night it would glow brightly, like a lighthouse in a sea of dimly-lit fishing boats. At one time it was a matter of pride to be able to say ‘I live at Doongaji House’.

PIROJA: Eat your food.

HORMUSJI: ...What a state it’s come to now! That rascal of a landlord... (Mistry 554-58).

This excerpt from *Doongaji House* by Cyrus Mistry captures the decline of the titular building as a symbol of the Parsi community’s socio-cultural erosion. The nostalgic recollection of the building’s past—its pioneering adoption of electricity and status as a towering landmark—reflects the former glory of the Parsi community during the colonial era. Hormusji’s description of the building glowing “*like a lighthouse in a sea of dimly-lit fishing boats*” conveys a sense of distinction and pride, emphasizing its symbolic prominence not only as a physical structure but as a representation of the community’s affluence, modernity, and influence in Bombay (now Mumbai).

However, the shift in tone from pride to lament—“*What a state it’s come to now!*”—highlights the decline of both the building and the community it represents. The use of the term “*rascal of a landlord*” signals the external forces of neglect and exploitation that have contributed to this degradation, underscoring the socio-political challenges faced by the Parsis in postcolonial India. The contrast between past and present reveals a collective yearning for lost stability and status, reflecting the broader displacement experienced by the community in an urbanizing, gentrifying city.

Piroja’s interruption, “*Eat your food,*” serves as a poignant contrast to the nostalgia expressed by Hormusji, highlighting the tension between longing for the past and dealing with the harsh realities of the present.

While Hormusji yearns for the glory of Doongaji House's former status and laments its decline, Piroja adopts a more pragmatic stance. Her remark suggests that she has come to terms with their diminished circumstances and prefers to focus on the present rather than dwelling on past grandeur. This dynamic between the characters mirrors the larger struggle within the Parsi community, which is torn between pride in its once-flourishing cultural identity and the painful reality of its fading influence in contemporary society. Piroja's response underscores the tension between preserving cherished memories and the necessity of adapting to an uncertain present.

This interaction ultimately highlights one of the play's central themes: the fragility of memory and heritage amidst the relentless forces of modernity and urban change. It positions Doongaji House as a powerful symbol of a community grappling with the twin challenges of longing for a fading legacy and confronting the difficult realities of an uncertain present. The characters' struggles with failing infrastructure, such as decayed wiring and the absence of basic utilities, reflect the declining socio-economic position of the Parsi community within urban spaces like Mumbai. Once influential and prosperous, the Parsis are now depicted as a community in decline, their struggles compressed in the physical disrepair of Doongaji House. Piroja's adaptation to the lamp's dim light—despite yearning for the fan's comfort—signifies an acceptance of diminished expectations, highlighting how economic hardships reshape aspirations and daily life. This material deprivation is not merely an individual challenge but reflects a broader socio-economic disempowerment faced by the community. Piroja's deep emotional connection to the past exemplifies the challenges of preserving cultural identity amidst such transformation. However, the ultimate destruction of Doongaji House not only severs the community's physical link to their history but also amplifies a profound sense of displacement and alienation.

The economic marginalization of the Parsis is compounded by their social stigmatization. The mocking phrase, "*Bawaji aya. Parsi bawaji ko dekho,*" (Mistry 218) underscores the alienation they experience

as a minority in a city undergoing rapid transformation. Sociologist Erving Goffman's concept of "stigma" provides a useful framework for understanding this dual burden. Goffman describes stigma as an attribute that is deeply discrediting, reducing individuals or groups to a marginalized status. In the context of the Parsis, economic decline exacerbates their social vulnerability, making them an easy target for ridicule and exclusion within an urban space increasingly dominated by other communities (Goffman 02).

The plight of the Parsis in Doongaji House aligns with the experiences of other marginalized groups facing systemic economic and social pressures. For the Parsis, economic struggles not only affect their material well-being but also their cultural self-perception, as the community's historical association with progress and prosperity contrasts sharply with their current realities. This erosion of economic agency destabilizes their sense of belonging and exacerbates feelings of alienation.

Piroja's resignation to the dim lamp and her wistful remark about missing the fan also reflect the resilience of marginalized communities in the face of systemic challenges. Adaptation to reduced circumstances becomes a form of survival, even as it highlights the loss of dignity and comfort once taken for granted. This duality underscores the emotional toll of economic decline, as characters like Piroja navigate their realities while yearning for the possibility of renewal.

Cultural Identity Through the Lens of Memory and Generational Conflict

Urbanization fundamentally alters social structures, often accelerating generational divides. This results in a detraditionalization process, wherein younger generations embrace values and behaviours that align with urban and cosmopolitan lifestyles, often at odds with traditional expectations. Hormusji's lament reflects this phenomenon as he perceives the younger generation's willingness to marry outside the Parsi community or adopt modern practices as a betrayal of cultural heritage. Hormusji's critical tone and nostalgic lamentation for "the Parsis of old" signify the older generation's deep sense of loss and their anxiety

over cultural preservation. His disdain for the younger generation's perceived departure from traditional values—embodied in his harsh comment, “*How low he has stooped . . . he's married one of them!*” (Mistry 221-22) —underscores a fear of cultural dilution and a stigmatized view of assimilation. The dialogue also highlights the older generation's preoccupation with maintaining cultural “purity.” This anxiety is discussed in Edward Said's concept of “imagined geographies,” where cultural boundaries are symbolically constructed and policed to maintain a sense of identity and exclusivity. For Hormusji, cultural identity is deeply tied to Parsi traditions, rituals, and values, which he believes are eroded by intermarriage and other forms of assimilation. Such anxieties resonate with Homi K. Bhabha's idea of the “unhomely,” wherein modern individuals experience a crisis of identity, torn between preserving a fixed sense of tradition and adapting to the fluid, hybrid realities of a globalized world. Hormusji's fears thus reflect an unhomely tension between the familiar (the traditions of the Parsi community) and the unfamiliar (the modern, multicultural urban setting).

The intergenerational tensions depicted in the exchange between Piroja and Hormusji in *Doongaji House* reflect the struggles of cultural continuity amidst the forces of modernity and globalization. Urbanization alters the processes of cultural transmission, prioritizing adaptability over the preservation of traditional practices. This shift often generates divisions within communities regarding which elements of their heritage should be retained, modified, or abandoned. Hormusji's lament reflects the emotional burden of witnessing the dissolution of cultural practices that have long served as markers of identity, while the younger generation's actions suggest a pragmatic approach to survival in a rapidly changing world. This dynamic tension underscores the complexities of cultural preservation in a globalized age, where tradition and modernity must coexist, often uneasily.

The older generation views cultural practices—rituals, language, and endogamy—as symbolic capital that defines and sustains the Parsi

community's unique identity. However, urbanization and modernization disrupt the mechanisms of transmitting this cultural capital. Younger generations, influenced by new social environments and value systems, may no longer view these practices as essential or relevant, leading to an erosion of traditional cultural reproduction. Hormusji's frustration with Piroja's dismissive stance— "*Okay. Enough now. Less said the better*" (Mistry 220)—also highlights this disjunction and increasing rejection or downplay of the significance of traditional values. The younger characters like Avan, Fali and Rusi embody hybridity, navigating the challenges of modern urban life while redefining what it means to be Parsi. In contrast, the older generation clings to a static notion of cultural authenticity, unable to reconcile the evolving identity of their community with the fluid demands of urban modernity. These tensions in *Doongaji House* highlight the universality of intergenerational conflict in minority groups negotiating modernity.

Piroja's description of the tragic death of Burjorji Bonesetter and her thoughts on the surreal quality of the tragedy— "it still felt like a dream" (Mistry 869-70)—illustrates the existential dislocation experienced by individuals when faced with profound loss. The sense of living in a "nightmare" echoes the collective psychological trauma of the Parsi community, where nostalgia for a better past clash with the harsh realities of their present decline. This is amplified by the absurdity of their situation, where daily routines—such as the arrival of the breadman and milkman—provide a false sense of normalcy amidst chaos. Piroja's words, "*In the morning, the breadman will come and wake us. Then the milkman*" (Mistry 872), highlights the futile desire to restore some semblance of order and continuity amidst destruction.

In *Doongaji House*, memory and nostalgia play a central role in shaping the characters' identities and their emotional connection to a rapidly changing world. The ancestral portraits and wistful recollections of a "*better time*" (Mistry 1535) underscore how memory serves as both a source of comfort and a reminder of loss. These elements anchor the characters to a heritage they value but increasingly perceive as slipping away. The burning of Doongaji House intensifies this dynamic,

symbolizing the fragility of the bond between memory and place. Hormusji's reflections, coupled with the destruction of the house, poignantly illustrate the challenges of sustaining cultural continuity in the face of systemic change and urbanization.

Piroja's reflection on how they once lived, and the routine rituals of everyday life also highlight how memory functions as a coping mechanism. The act of remembering "*how it used to be*" provides comfort, but also creates a sense of alienation as they are no longer able to live those memories. Her words, "*It's like the pain in a dream*" (Mistry 873), suggest that memory serves as a way to process grief, but it is ultimately inadequate in preserving cultural continuity. Her mention of "*frying you an egg*" (Mistry 875) suggests an attempt to return to normalcy by repeating domestic routines, even though the broader context of their life has changed irrevocably. The characters' internal struggles to reconcile their past with their present reality reflect broader anxieties within the Parsi community about survival, identity, and the preservation of heritage in a changing world.

Pierre Nora's concept of *lieux de mémoire* (sites of memory) provides a theoretical framework to explore these themes. According to Nora, "*Memory is life, borne by living societies founded in its name. It remains in permanent evolution, open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting, unconscious of its successive deformations, vulnerable to manipulation and appropriation, susceptible to being long dormant and periodically revived. History, on the other hand, is the reconstruction, always problematic and incomplete, of what is no longer*". This distinction between memory and history helps illuminate the characters' struggle to preserve their collective memory as their cultural and physical spaces erode.

The ancestral portraits in the play represent *lieux de mémoire*, functioning as tangible links to the past. For the characters, these portraits are not merely artifacts but vessels of memory, embodying the values, traditions, and identity of a community that once thrived. However, as Nora suggests, memory is not static—it evolves and is subject to both personal

and collective reinterpretation. In Doongaji House, this evolution is evident in the way nostalgia shapes the characters' perceptions of their heritage. The past becomes idealized, offering solace even as it underscores the pain of loss.

Hormusji's exasperation with his son Rusi for marrying outside the community and settling in Canada—"He's married one of them!"—exemplifies fears of cultural assimilation. His disdain reveals anxieties about the dilution of Parsi traditions and values, particularly in the context of urban modernization and globalization. These anxieties align with Homi K. Bhabha's concept of cultural hybridity in *The Location of Culture*, where the intermingling of cultures creates spaces of negotiation but also incites fear of identity loss. The generational conflict also reflects broader postcolonial tensions discussed by Edward Said in *Culture and Imperialism*. Said highlights how formerly dominant communities grapple with the destabilization of their identities as the societal hierarchy shifts in postcolonial contexts (Said).

Perin's reflection on the younger generation leaving Doongaji House deepens this theme of displacement. Lines like "*First, your Rusi went away to Canada. Then, Fali went away to Chikkalwadi*" (Mistry, *Doongaji House*, *Kindle Locations* 86-87) illustrate the broader exodus of Parsis, driven by economic and social pressures. The choice of Canada—a symbol of opportunity—represents not just migration but a departure from traditional customs. Similarly, the statement, "*The Bogdawallas and their children moved out lock, stock, and barrel*" (Mistry 87-88), signifies the permanence of this departure, highlighting the community's gradual disappearance from its historic urban spaces.

The characters' nostalgic attachment to their past highlights the ambivalent nature of memory. Hormusji's reflections on the Parsi community's decline reveal this reflective quality, as he mourns not only the loss of cultural traditions but also the diminishing sense of communal identity. Yet, this nostalgia also serves as a burden, trapping the characters in a longing for a past that feels increasingly irretrievable.

The burning of Doongaji House represents the severing of the connection between memory and place, a theme central to Nora's exploration of memory. For the characters, the house is more than a physical structure; it is a repository of cultural identity and shared history. Its destruction symbolizes the erasure of a physical anchor for their collective memory, leaving the characters adrift in a city undergoing relentless urban transformation. This aligns with Edward Said's observations on the "loss of locality" in postcolonial societies, where displacement disrupts the continuity of memory and identity (*Culture and Imperialism*).

As Nora argues, memory is vulnerable to manipulation, appropriation, and eventual dormancy, but it is also capable of revival. In *Doongaji House*, this tension is evident in the characters' attempts to preserve their heritage despite the encroachments of modernity. While the physical destruction of the house signifies a profound loss, the characters' memories and stories suggest the potential for cultural resilience.

The forced relocation of the elderly characters in *Doongaji House* symbolizes a profound disruption, both physical and psychological, that encapsulates the trauma of displacement. The theme of displacement is not only spatial but also emotional, as Hormusji and Piroja navigate the devastating loss of both their home and their once-prominent place in society. The transition to a "*strange new hole*" intensifies their feelings of alienation, underscoring the existential displacement that accompanies the loss of familiar spaces. This resonates with larger anxieties about identity, self-definition, and belonging in an urban landscape increasingly dominated by economic imperatives and spatial reconfigurations.

Displacement in *Doongaji House* aligns with what Edward Said describes as the "loss of locality," where spatial dislocation erodes identity and a sense of place (Said). For the elderly characters, relocation from the chawl severs their connection to a space imbued with personal and communal history, amplifying the psychological burden of losing a cultural anchor. Their inability to adapt to the new environment underscores the deep ties between memory, identity, and place. As Yi-

Fu Tuan discusses in *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*, place is not merely a geographic location but a repository of lived experiences and meanings. The chawl, with its shared spaces and cultural resonance, represents such a place for the characters, and its destruction fractures their sense of continuity. Historically, chawls functioned as sites of collective living and cultural transmission, fostering close-knit relationships and shared values. The decline of the chawl in the narrative mirrors the disintegration of these communal bonds, paralleling the Parsi community's struggles to maintain coherence amidst socio-economic and cultural pressures. The destruction of the chawl signifies more than a physical loss; it represents a metaphysical rupture in the community's shared identity. This aligns with Pierre Nora's concept of *lieux de mémoire* (sites of memory), where physical spaces serve as repositories of collective memory and identity. The chawl's disappearance symbolizes the erasure of a communal site of memory, forcing its inhabitants to confront their cultural dislocation and the challenge of preserving identity in an unfamiliar urban landscape. Its decline also reflects the broader impacts of urbanization and gentrification, which prioritize economic progress over the preservation of community and cultural spaces. In the context of *Doongaji House*, the chawl's destruction exemplifies this dynamic, where the quest for urban modernization marginalizes minority groups and disrupts their traditional ways of life. Moreover, this displacement creates a sense of existential rupture, as the elderly characters struggle to find meaning and belonging in a world that has discarded their histories. The uprooting of individuals from their familiar contexts leads to feelings of alienation and purposelessness, themes that resonate deeply in the narrative. Hormusji's attachment to his home mirrors the emotional and cultural displacement experienced by many Parsis as they struggle to find their place in a modernizing India. His desperate longing for the house to "release" him, "as you released Burjorji" (Mistry 915), suggests that for him, death is preferable to living in a society where his community no longer holds the same power or relevance it once did. The imagery of Burjorji, whose death is referenced here, represents the finality of an era for the Parsi community,

whose identity is tied to a bygone age. The fire that ultimately engulfs the building is particularly evocative. It symbolizes the inevitable erasure of heritage, leaving behind only a “vacant plot”—a stark emblem of loss and absence. The moment is captured poignantly in the narrator’s reflection: “*Then I realized the whole building was burning. Doongaji House was up in flames. I ran to save my life. When I reached the street, there was no fire any more. But the building was not there either. Only a vacant plot of land*” (Mistry 653-55). This visceral description underscores not only the physical destruction of the structure but also the symbolic obliteration of cultural memory and identity that it represents.

Conclusion

The recurring themes in *Doongaji House* by Cyrus Mistry reflect the multifaceted struggles of the Parsi community amidst socio-economic decline and cultural erosion in a rapidly transforming Mumbai. Central to the narrative is the decay of Doongaji House, a colonial-era chawl that stands as a poignant metaphor for the community’s diminishing prominence and cultural heritage. The deteriorating structure embodies the intersection of economic marginalization, social stigmatization, and urban displacement that define the contemporary Parsi experience. Through its portrayal of financial decline, the play offers a layered critique of systemic disempowerment and the societal pressures that minority communities endure.

Mistry captures the human cost of this decline through the fractured relationships within the Pochkhanwalla family. Their intergenerational tensions reflect the broader challenges of sustaining cultural identity in a world shaped by urbanization and assimilation. The family’s struggles mirror the Parsi community’s larger existential crisis—balancing the preservation of tradition with the realities of modern life. Piroja’s reflections on her family’s displacement poignantly articulate the trauma of losing not just a home but a repository of shared memories and identity. These themes are amplified by the juxtaposition of ancestral portraits and nostalgic recollections against the physical and symbolic destruction

of Doongaji House, underscoring the fragility of memory and its dependence on communal spaces. Memory emerges as both a source of strength and a site of vulnerability, illuminating the precariousness of cultural preservation in an ever-changing urban landscape. Through its exploration of nostalgia and cultural identity, the narrative reveals how the characters' sense of self is intertwined with the chawl's physical presence. This interplay of memory and space underscores the profound impact of urbanization, as the loss of Doongaji House signals the erosion of communal bonds and shared heritage. The forced relocation of elderly residents captures the existential challenges of displacement, as individuals grapple with alienation and a loss of purpose. Doongaji House, as a microcosm of the Parsi community, embodies both a physical haven and a symbolic anchor for shared identity. Its decline parallels the anxieties of cultural extinction faced by the Parsis, highlighting the challenges of maintaining a sense of belonging in a modern, increasingly homogenized urban context.

At its core, *Doongaji House* critiques the dehumanizing effects of urbanization while offering a nuanced exploration of identity, memory, and resilience. Mistry's characters confront social stigma and economic hardship, navigating the complexities of cultural pride and survival in a shifting socio-political landscape. The narrative situates their struggles within broader systemic inequalities, offering a microcosmic view of the challenges faced by minority communities in urban environments. Ultimately, *Doongaji House* delves deeply into the existential questions of self-definition and collective continuity. It examines how memory and nostalgia shape both individual and communal identities, even as the forces of urban transformation threaten to erase them. By portraying the Parsi community's fight to preserve its cultural heritage amidst displacement and marginalization, the play invites reflection on the universal tensions between tradition and modernity, resilience and vulnerability. Through its intricate exploration of these themes, *Doongaji House* stands as a profound commentary on the complexities of preserving identity, place, and heritage in an ever-evolving urban world.

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