

## “Auspicious Occasion” by Rohinton Mistry: a breakdown

### Plot Summary

Rustomji and his (much younger) wife Mehroo, both Parsis, are preparing to go to the fire-temple to observe *Behram Roje* (the sacred and auspicious 20<sup>th</sup> day of the month by the Parsi calendar). It isn't a good day for Rustomji so far, however: he is constipated, and while on the toilet the upstairs lavatory leaks filthy material onto him. Mehroo, who won't let these things dampen her favourite special day, dutifully makes all the observances and even takes steps to get the plumbing fixed; she then goes by bus to the fire-temple – only to find that a murder has occurred there and all prayers and ceremonies have been cancelled. Rustomji, still coaxing his bowels without luck, leaves later in his pristine white prayer-clothes – only to have them stained by the red tobacco-spit of an upper-deck bus-rider! Furious, Rustomji begins hurling insults at all nearby, and almost gets himself beaten up - but diffuses the moment by clowning with his dentures. Ashamed, enraged and helpless, Rustomji makes his way home to be met by his returning wife, who tells him the story of a priest murdered by a *chasniwalla* in the temple. Rustomji is overcome with melancholy - *what is happening in the world?*, he wonders - which sparks sadness and sympathy in Mehroo. She makes him tea, and they share a tender moment.

### Main Characters

Rustomji: Lawyer, complainer, curmudgeon, leerer, Parsi, husband. Vain, cynical and lustful. Vindictive and stingy holdout who won't pay for repairs: insists the building trustees pay. Ailing but still energetic older man: things are falling apart in and around him, and he rails against it. Not as impressive as he thinks he is; he can be quite vulnerable. Can be grateful and tender with Mehroo.

Mehroo: Young, orthodox, energetic, devout, dutiful and compassionate Parsi wife. Puts up with a lot of grief from Rustomji without getting angry. Proactive and industrious: does all kinds of chores at once. Thinks better of people than her husband: won't believe in rumored corruptions. Serene and “oblivious” at times; lover of rites and ritual. Sympathetic and loving: touched by her husband's rarely seen vulnerability.

### Peripheral characters who reappear in other stories

Nariman Hansotia: “retired and likeable old man” who drives a Mercedes. More willing to pay for repairs than his rival Rustomji; plays a joke on him. Rustomji is the only one who thinks he's “horrible”.

Hirabai: Nariman's wife.

Dr. Mody: liked and wealthy, but a “gadfly to the trustees”.

### Themes

- The so-very-human people of the Firosha Baag Apartment complex
- Parsi (Zoroastrian) ritual and identity
- Purity vs. Stain (dirt and washing), Clean vs. Unclean - cycles
- Separation and Re-connection
- Bad and Good luck (auspices)
- Poverty, decay and strife
- The saving grace of routine and ritual
- All the life and action (for better or for worse) of city living in India.

### Symbols/motifs

The Crumbling Building (poverty, age, things fall apart)

Fire (purity, compassion)

Water (life, regeneration, renewal) – see especially pages 28-29

## Title

Interesting deliberate ambiguity here. With all that goes wrong and even gets disgusting or dangerous, how can this be an auspicious (fortunate) occasion? The temple is even closed because of a murder! The title could be verbally ironic, but it could also be sincere: all these mishaps and miseries bring Rustomji close to his wife at the end, and make him feel close to and appreciative of her.

## 2 important quotes

“Usually, during a bus ride to the fire temple, Mehroo attentively watched the scenes unfolding as the bus made its way creeping way, wondering at the resilient ingenuity with which life was made liveable inside dingy little holes and inhospitable, frightful structures. Now, however, Mehroo sat oblivious to the bustle and meanness of lives of these narrow streets. None of it pierced the serenity with which she anticipated the perfect peace and calm she would soon be a part of inside the fire temple.” (19)

“He gazed pensively at the walls and ceiling, where bits of paint and plaster were waiting to peel, waiting to fall into their pots and pans, their vessels of water, their lives. Tomorrow, Gajra would come and sweep away the flakes of white from the floor; she would clean out the pots and pans, and fill fresh water into the vessels. The Times of India would arrive, he would read it as he sipped his tea...” (28)

## Genre tie-in

- The symbols/motifs established through the apartment and fire-temple **settings**
- The **plot** begins with Rustomji's rage but ends with his grateful tenderness: connects to human complexity theme.
- **3<sup>rd</sup> person narration** limits to his and her perspectives: confers an intimacy, brings reader closer to these people.
- **Plot** develops **character** through **flashback/memory**
- **Plot** keeps frustrating idea of an auspicious occasion, only to deliver it in a way in the end: a sort of reconnection and renewal. Also, cyclic return develops “cycles” theme.

## Final thoughts and connections

- The story shows the best (tenderness, compassion, vulnerability, serenity, humor, sanctity) and the worst (murder, disloyal lust, vindictiveness, rage, riot, filth and squalor) of us. Compare *The Road*.
- The story uses flashback/memory to develop character and cyclic plot structure to develop theme. Compare *Oryx and Crake*.
- The story does not make us hate or feel contempt for Rustomji, though it is comic and is not shy about showing his shortcomings, foibles and earthy functions. Mistry is a realist, and, though often wry, ironic or sad, an ultimately life-affirming one at that. He embraces the earthy details of human life and finds resonance there - and finds *material* there. After all, life in all of its color is what makes stories possible: it gives writers something to write about. Compare James Joyce (*Portrait*) and Stephen's calling to “recreate life out of life”!