

PARSI'S CULTURE AND RELIGION IN THE FICTION OF ROHINTON MISTRY

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ABSTRACT

In this paper the author discussed the Parsi's Culture and Religion in the Fiction of Rohinton Mistry. Indian culture is rich, diverse and unique. Indian culture is more receptive to the intrinsic worth of others. Therefore, it tends to overlook those aspects that are referred to as 'alien' and build a cooperative society rather than one based on competition. In Rohinton Mistry's discourse there appears a deep sensitivity to the perils and troubles of the Parsi community in postcolonial India. The discourse of Rohinton Mistry is one such, where there is assertion of the ethnic identity i.e., the Parsi identity. It not only focuses on the ethno-religious nature of these texts, but also explores how they relate to the wider Indian context and in the case of expatriate situation, to the new milieu. The texts of Rohinton Mistry primarily establish their own ethnic space within the dominant culture of the Indian contexts and only secondly are they postcolonial literature.

Key Words : Parsi, Rohinton Mistry, A Fine Balance, Religion, Fiction.

INTRODUCTION

Social scientists point their finger towards various reasons like insecurity, identity crisis, a possible submersion in the dominant Hindu culture, etc. To cap it all there are other disturbing ethnic features which are eroding the community from within. We have lost the ethnic exclusiveness of generations, we have lost roots, we have decreased the birth rate, the divorce rate is high, we are closing ranks, we have discriminated against the girl child, urbanization is increasing, we have alienated ourselves, etc. Cultural studies make culture the centre of social and literary analysis.

During colonial times there were many Parsi writers like Cornelia. Sorabji, Behram Malabari and Freedoon Kabarji. They never felt any kind of insecurity like post colonial Parsi writers in English, who at the end of colonial rule, went into a kind of hibernation. With independence, the colonial presence that served as a buffer between Indians and the Parsis was gone, and the Parsis pulled back into their prudent silence.

Salman Rushdie's revival of Indian English writing in the 1980s included writings by Bapsi Sidhwa, Farrukh Dhondy, Rohinton Mistry, Firdaus Kanga, Dina Mehta, Bomban Desai and Thrity Umrigar, which also exhibited ethno-religious traits that were absent from pre-colonial Parsi writings. Parsi novels in English made rapid progress in terms of both quality and quantity despite appearing late in Indian Writing in English. Perin Bharucha's *The Fire Worshippers* (1968) is among the first important works of postcolonial fiction. It chronicles the life and culture of Parsis from the perspective of a Parsi. It is more of a sociological and historical document than anything else. But this turn to community, be it in sociology, in politics or

in literature, has its own danger too. "In our wish to make ourselves heard," Edward Said notes insightfully, "We tend very often to forget that the world is a crowded place and that if everyone were to insist on the radical purity or priority of one's voice, all we would have would be the awful din of unending strife and a bloody political mess, the true horror of which is beginning to be perceptible here and there in the re-emergence of racist politics in Europe, the cacophony of debates over political correctness and identity politics in the United States, and to speak about my own part of the world. The intolerance of religious prejudice and illusionary promises of Bismarckian despotism, ala Saddam Hussein and his numerous Arab epigones and counterparts." (Said, 1993: xxiii) In India, the rise of Shiv Sena Hindu fundamentalist and the ethnic conflicts in the North-East are the examples.

The discourse of Rohinton Mistry is one such, where there is assertion of the ethnic identity i.e., the Parsi identity. It not only focuses on the ethno-religious nature of these texts, but also explores how they relate to the wider Indian context and in the case of expatriate situation, to the new milieu. The texts of Rohinton Mistry primarily establish their own ethnic space within the dominant culture of the Indian contexts and only secondly are they postcolonial literature. This space creation is done by an assertion of ethno-religious Parsi identity" (Bharucha, 1998:251). This aspect of Parsi identity is kernel to Mistry's text. Every incident, every character and every action in Mistry's text is coloured by this 'cultural difference' - of being a Parsi. In Mistry's works, a difference is explored, i.e., a community difference. Mistry's texts deal with the Parsi community. *Tales From Firozsha Baag, Such A Long Journey, A Fine*



Balance, and Family Matters all have postcolonial implications owing to Mistry's role as a representative and spokesperson of the Parsi community and of an ethnic minority. The central aspect of the Parsi identity must be clarified to understand how postcolonial conditions affect the minuscule minority community's identity (Bharucha, 1995: 32).

Despite his imaginative constructions, he obscures the reality of India in Canada. The book, *Such a Long Journey*, is genuine in its portrayal of traditions and lifestyle in Paris, as well as in the honorability of the main character, Gustad. The writing style and exposition are effective. He also wrote a novel set in India, *A Fine Balance*. Mistry has grappled with the issue of a south Asian diaspora author standing up to his new country, Canada. His books are clear, sharp and diverting. They reflect and embrace multiculturalism. The author's fiction captures a portion of the inclinations, feelings and encounters of a migrant's everyday life. According to Mistry, the Parsi people group in Mumbai belongs to a lower white-collar class. "Firozsha Baag" was built on the spot of the Khodadad building. At the age of twenty-three, Mistry left Bombay for Canada. Bombay is at the center of his fiction. The Bombay-born author has been compared to Salman Rushdie, who lives abroad. Though the two men are similar, their differences are perhaps just as compelling. Mistry finds motivation in both the pointedly reviewed youth encounters and the changes in relocating. As is always the case with such extraordinary and obviously close-to-home accounts, it is difficult to draw a line between fiction and reality. Interestingly, there are some overlaps between the prompts and decisions of the essayist and a portion of his characters. Mistry has been influenced into taking his first degree in a science subject rather than in a subject of human experience, to which he seems increasingly suited, much as Sohrab Noble. In *Such a Long Journey* in spite of the heaviness of universal strictures. Father de Souza, the head of the school, authorized him to acquire two books per week rather than one from the St Xavier's library, a gloat also shared by the youthful Jehangir Bulsara in *Tales from Firozsha Baag*.

Mistry's discourse deals with the "psychosocial burden" (Luhmann, 1996: 14) of the past, present and the tenebrous future of the Parsis. They are confronted with the loss of their glorious golden past, the colonial era and the need to adapt to a political reality in which the past attachment is seen as distinctly double edged. The important and interesting consequence of this need to adapt seems to be the present day Parsis' malady. Their culture speaks a discourse of decay in which Parsis attack themselves as inadequate- inadequate as Englishmen, inadequate as Indians, inadequate as socially appropriate human beings. The combination of emotionally intense ambivalence and self-attack lie at the centre of postcolonial experience of Mistry's Parsi

community. Mistry's characters are caught within these contradictory tensions and attachments, avoiding powerlessness by taking responsibility for the fall, shamed for their trespass but yearning for their former glory. The Parsi community in Mistry's discourse uses the "semiotics of the past to define the relationships of the present" (Luhmann, 1996:23), because the past is still profoundly present in their everyday life.

Gustad Noble, the main character in such a long story, is a family man who works in a private bank. More than that, he is true to his name in more than one respect. His father operated a prestigious bookshop in Bombay, now known as Mumbai. Although the writer refers to the city as Bombay, he supports the Shiv Sena's call to change Bombay's name to Mumbai. The Parsi community and Mumbai are unique in having such a long journey. The author of this novel aims to shed light on the Parsi lifestyle, social relationships, and problems. As the Hindu majority dominates India, the plight of Muslims is explored in this film. As a result, such a study reveals the Parsi community's problems and paints the majority community in a negative light. This perception deepens throughout the novel. In the end, Mistry's viewpoint becomes more apparent since Gustad tore the black paper from the windows a long time ago as a symbol of his point of view. Due to a sea change in the protagonist's mind, he no longer requires his house to be protected from the voyeuristic gaze of the majority community. Accordingly, the writer resolves the conflict between the minority and the majority in favor of reconciliation. This reflects the humanist principle of fraternity. One typically feels melancholy when reading Mistry's characters for one of these reasons: a vague sense of loss, a sense of discontent brought on by lack of fulfilment, a sense of helplessness, a sense of decay, and regret over action taken or not taken. Due to all these reasons, it is not surprising that every character in the novel is melancholy to some degree, particularly given the current plight of the Parsis. Taking Mistry's discourse in this chapter as a point of departure, it is evident that the community's discontent is strongly related to its self-imposed insularity, which in postcolonial terms amounts to the rejection of hybrids. In a fine balance, there is another Parsi character. Dina Dalal's friend Maneck Kohlah is a relative who lives in some hill station in North India. From the city-by-the-sea to his home in the hills, it takes Maneck Kohlah 36 hours. Maneck had come to the city to apply for admission to an engineering college. Finally, it was Avinash who became friendly with Maneck after he was admitted to a college and stayed in a hostel. "The money for maintenance is all going into someone's pocket," his friend Avinash reveals of the hostel's sorry state. It's the same as the canteen. There is a large catering contract and waste management is the responsibility of the caterer. There is however a choice between vegetarian and non-vegetarian waste (Geeta

1992:236). As a result, Mistry has eloquently revealed how people of all backgrounds acted heroically when tumultuous conditions prevailed. Since kings and queens have passed on, ordinary people have the power to control the world in terms of numbers - which is the standard today since no king or queen can control the world.

In Mistry's fiction, "The Parsi becomes the 'Other' because she is depicted as a traditional, even conservative, religious-minded person in an Indian modernity that is supposedly secular. The Parsi in Mistry's works is shown as resistant to change, as she holds on to belief systems that are antiquated and irrelevant, given Indian's move onwards secular industrialization and modernization. One mode of foregrounding Parsi uniqueness is the narrative emphasis on their rituals. Rituals become the site of the 'self' 'Other' debate in Mistry." (Nandini, 2007: 47). Given the pervasive religious society, the critic's point of view may not be particularly factual. The way that Mistry depicts the lower middle class Parsis in most of his works makes them qualify for the 'other' label.

The treatment of marginalized and oppressed groups is widely known in Rohinton Mistry's work. In his opinion, those who are commonly known as losers should be granted human rights. The protagonists of his stories should be ordinary people who lack money and power. They are therefore subjected to different kinds of pressure as a result. In each of his works, there are shopkeepers, vagrants, ayahs, rogues, and other minor characters as well.

Mistry's first novel, *Such a Long Journey*, is considered a minority novel about the Parsis. In Mistry's fiction, she provides minute details about Parsi culture, rituals, prayers, and festivals. This humanistic focus is apparent when we examine her fiction closely. As Mistry presented the Parsi culture, he expressed concern for this disappearing community. 'Humanism' focuses on human nature. Despite mumbling Parsi prayers all the time, Mistry does not see himself as a Parsi like Yezad in *Family Matters*. Gustad Noble is emphasized as a true Parsi in *Such a Long Journey*. Though he prays regularly, he also believes that all fellow humans are equal. Numerous examples of this can be found, such as giving milk bottles to street urchins and helping pavement painters. Dina Dalal does not practice Parsi prayer, but her humanist view points are evident. Mistry opposes superstitions, much less to say witchcraft, in any religion, and focuses on the human element. There are many differences between the Parsi culture and Indian culture, but also some similarities. As it is his duty as a

Parsi to describe Parsi religious and cultural practices, he gives a lot of space to his description. There is a rapid decline of the Parsi race around the world, and it has been recorded that he is worried about its extinction.

Parsi dusters are similar to Hindu pandits. Mistry sees them as pieces of the same puzzle. Erasmus's work *Praise of Folly*, in which he exposed and criticized corruption in the church and the depraved clergy, inspired comparison with him. *A Fine Balance* depicts Parsi priests in pen drawings. Dina's mother took her to the fire temple when she was a young girl. Her father took her there once a month.

Prior to the ceremony, Mr. Framji profusely shook Mrs. Shroff's hand and hugged Dina in the manner he reserved for girls and young women. Dustoor Daab-Chaab earned his title for his fondling and squeezing skills. His colleagues resented his lack of subtlety more than his acts since he would not remove his embraces from their perspective. He threatened to dishonour the fire temple one day if he drooled over his victim.

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