

Reflections of Parsi Culture in Rohinton Mistry's *Such A Long Journey* from Diasporic Perspective

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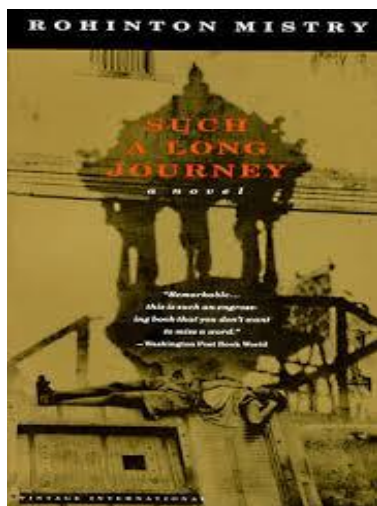
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Abstract

Parsis are a small ethno-religious community in India, devoted to Zoroastrianism. During 8th century, their ancestors were emigrated from their home land, Iran. They left Iran only because to preserve their religious faith from being Islamized by the Islamic Arabians. When Iran and Persia were conquered by Arabs in 7th Century AD, they tried to impose Islam religion on Persians. In order to protect their religious faith, they left their country and reached western India. Gradually they flourished in this sort and came to be known as Parsis. Rohinton Mistry an Indian diaspora writer, occupies a significant place in the Indian English Literary scene. Rohinton Mistry's character are nostalgic about their past. There is a history behind every culture. Characters of Mistry are always trying to hang on the Parsi culture. Parsi culture has a unique quality and the Parsi members show an instinct to cling on their culture at any cost. When compared to Indian culture, they follow a different one. They have their own attitude in every cultural aspect like rituals, religion, food, dressing, beliefs etc. Such a Long Journey (1991), Mistry's first novel, is the story of a middle class Parsi bank clerk, Gustad Noble. Setting of the novel is Bombay in 1971 and it tells the story of marginalized Parsi community in India during Indira Gandhi administration in India. Gustad, the central character of the novel, is considered as the mouthpiece of a typical Parsiman, who is very strict in following the Parsi rituals.

Key Words: Parsi Culture, Alienation, Nostalgia, Ethnic Anxiety, Cultural clash



Rohinton Mistry, the expatriate writer who settled in Canada occupied a remarkable position in Indian English Literature. This was rightly said by Nilufer Bharucha:

As an Indian who now lives and writes from Canada, Rohinton Mistry is a writer of the Indian Diaspora. However, Mistry is also a Parsi Zoroastrian and as a person whose ancestors were forced into exile by the Islamic conquest of Iran, he was in a diaspora even in India. This informs his writings with the experience of multiple displacements. ("When Old Tracks are Lost: Rohinton Mistry's Fiction as Diasporic Discourse" 23)

Rohinton Mistry an Indian diaspora writer, occupies a significant place in the Indian English Literary scene. Mistry has emerged as a distinguished socio-political novelist in the contemporary diasporic writer. He occupies a recognized position among other Parsi diaspora writers like Mehar Pastongi, Bapsi Sidhwa, Dina Mehta, Keki Daruwala, Boman Desai etc. He sets his novel in his native Bombay. Mistry's concern and sympathy are primarily for Parsi community, who are struggling for an identity in a multicultural society. In an interview with Geoff Hancock, Mistry states that "his purpose of writing is neither for an audience nor with a message in mind, he writes for the record of the distinct identity of a small group of people to which he belongs. He claims, politics and religion come in a second way". So, it can be assumed that Mistry's writings reflect his concern for the identity of his people in a multicultural society.

Parsis are a small ethno-religious community in India, devoted to Zoroastrianism. During 8th century, their ancestors were emigrated from their home land, Iran. They left Iran only because to preserve their religious faith from being Islamized by the Islamic Arabians. When Iran and Persia were conquered by Arabs in 7th Century AD, they tried to impose Islam religion on Persians. In order to protect their religious faith, they left their country and reached western India. Gradually they flourished in this sort and came to be known as Parsis. The name derived from the name of their original homeland in Iranian province, "Paras" or "Faras". They are the followers of Prophet Zoroaster. Before the arrival of zarathushtra the people of Iran believed in many gods. Distressed by this, he left all worldly pleasures and devoted himself to worship Ahura Mazda. "Avesta" is the sacred prayer book of Zoroastrianism which includes the thoughts and prayers of zarathushtra. It is the record of earliest customs of Persian history. Parsis worshiped Ahura Mazda as their lord, who created the universe and he was symbolized by light and fire. Zoroastrianism continued as a state religion until the Muslim conquest.

Such a Long Journey (1991) is Mistry's first novel, which was short listed for Booker Prize. It is the story of Gustad Noble. Setting of the novel is Bombay in 1971 and it tells the story of marginalized Parsi community in India during Indira Gandhi administration in India. Mistry has produced two more novels about India, *A Fine Balance* (1995) and *Family Matters* (2002). Both are short listed for Booker Prize *A Fine Balance* exposes the changes in Indian Society from Independence in 1947 to the emergency by Indira Gandhi. *Family Matters* is an enthralling story of Nariman Vakeel. It is considered as sermon on Parsi religious community. Story is told in a highly emotional manner set in Bombay in mid 1990's. Like Mistry, his characters are also displaced and consistently searching for a new identity.

In his novels, Mistry realistically portrays the present miserable state of Parsi diaspora. Dr. Fitter, a Parsi character in *Family Matters* laments the pathetic situation of the community today,

...Parsi men of today [are] useless, dithering idiots, the race [has] deteriorated. When you think of our forefathers, the industrialists and shipbuilders who established the foundation of modern India, the philanthropists who gave us our

hospitals and schools and libraries and bags, what luster they brought to our community and the nation (51).

Rohinton Mistry's character are nostalgic about their past. There is a history behind every culture. From the very beginning itself, Mistry portrays historical elements, which were related to culture. Characters of Mistry are always trying to hang on the Parsi culture. Parsi culture has a unique quality and the Parsi members show an instinct to cling on their culture at any cost. When compared to Indian culture, they follow a different one. They have their own attitude in every cultural aspect like rituals, religion, food, dressing, beliefs etc. Mistry's concern for the diminishing number of Parsis is explained through his novels. Mistry uses his characters as a mouthpiece to make the readers aware of the contribution of Parsis to the great Indian culture in every aspect.

His novels highlight the honesty of the Parsi community. It is another distinguishing characteristic of the ethnic group. They enjoy the elite status in the pluralistic Indian society before freedom of India. They lament, in free India, Parsis gradually lost the exalted position enjoyed earlier. At present, they feel that their existence is under threat, due to various factors. The increasing communal clashes, the changing social system and globalization triggered of their depressed condition. Mistry shares his fears through the voice of Dr. Fitter. He comments that the Parsis will be like "dinosaurs" (400).

Such a Long Journey is the story of a middle class Parsi bank clerk, Gustad Noble. Setting of the novel is Bombay in 1971. Gustad, the central character of *Such a Long Journey*, is considered as the mouthpiece of a typical Parsiman, who is very strict in following the Parsi rituals. For Gustad, a day without his morning Kusti Prayer is unacceptable, as Kusti is the foundation of every Zoroastrian rituals. Rohinton Mistry highlighted the momentous nature of Kusti prayer by including it in the opening scene of the novel, *Such a Long Journey*. Gustad Noble is introduced in this novel in his prayer dress. "The hour was approaching six, and up in the compound's solitary tree the sparrows began to call. Gustad listened to their chirping every morning while reciting his Kusti Prayers" (*Such a Long Journey* 1)

As food and culture share a closely knitted relationship, it shares a relation with history too. Food evokes nostalgia in human beings, Nostalgia about our past. In a postmodern world, people lost their food culture and they had an affinity towards fast food. So, they can't think about their food without Nostalgia. Here, in this novel, certain food habits of Parsis are highlighted. It throws light on the food culture of Parsis and shows how they are nostalgic about their past. There we can see an aching for their culture. As a middle-class man, Gustad couldn't afford costly food items regularly. At times, he remembers his blissful child hood when he had with his whole family. Then he enjoyed delicious food often. But now he couldn't afford such food items. Parsis are not ready to make a compromise in the quality of food. They had some strange way to ensure the quality of food. Through the memory Gustad, Mistry interestingly described an incident of preparing chicken at home.

When Gustad was a little boy, live chickens were standard procedure in his fathers' house. Grandma would have it no other way.... Gustad remembered them arriving in a covered basket balanced on the head of the servant who walked behind his father, sometimes two, sometimes four or eight, depending on how many guests were invited. Grandma would inspect the birds invariably.... (19)

After brining it from the market they feed it with fine grain for 2 days.

First feed it for two days, less will not do. And always feed best grain. And always feed best grain, the very best. Always remember: what goes in chicken-stomach, at the end comes back to our stomach. After two days prepare the pot, light the stove, get masala ready. (19)

Only because of this nostalgic memory and its impact on Gustad, he wanted to fill his humble house with the same happiness, he had experienced in his childhood. Being a typical Parsi man, he followed the culture of his ancestors and bought a live chicken to home.

So, he arranged a little dinner to celebrate his elder son Sorab's IIT admission and younger daughter Roshan's birthday with his one or two close friends from bank.

Malcolm, the childhood friend of Gustad was remembered occasionally. He belongs to Goan Christian community and had a good knowledge in Indian Culture and history. Malcolm, evoked an admiration and sometimes a little envious on him. Mistry used Malcolm to speak about colonization and its effect on Indian people, especially about Portuguese colonizes and their mingling with the local Goans. So Goan's have mixed culture, as a result of colonization. He often expresses his opinion on Indian multiculturalism and its impact on different communities. He said:

. . . there we are minorities in a nation of Hindus. Let them eat pulses and grams and beans, spiced with their stinky asafetida – what they calling hing. Let them part their lives away. The modernized Hindus eat mutton or chicken, if they want to be more fashionable. But he will get our protein from their sacred cow.... (23).

Malcolm taught Gustad to eat beef and he familiarized Gustad the rituals followed in the church and in his community. The friendship b/w Gustad and Malcolm highlighted the Arsha Bharatha Culture. Malcolm knows the mythologies of every religion.

While dealing with Parsi culture and tradition, reference of 'Tower of Silence' is inevitable. Tower of silence is the place for the examination of the Zoroastrians. As a ritual, they exposed the dead bodies to vultures. The rationale behind this tradition is bit strange. They considered a dead body is a pollutant and it contaminate everything, it came into contact with. So to impede the pollution of earth, the dead bodies are placed on the top of a tower and exposed to vultures. When comes the funeral scene of Dinshawji, Mistry comes described it in detail. "Then without touching Dinshawji's flesh using their special hooked rods they would tear off the white cloth. Every stitch, till he was exposed to the creature of the air, naked as the day he had entered the world." (*Such a Long Journey* 254). Miss Kutpita is one of the major characters, who clings to the Parsi culture and tradition.

After the establishment of Parsis in Indian soil, they have carved a niche for themselves in every phase of life. They contributed a lot to the all-round development of India without disturbing their Parsi culture. Patriotism of Parsis rightly shown by Nani A. Dalkhiwala in her book by quoting Dadabhai Naoroji.

Whether I am a Hindu, a Mohmedan, a Parsi, a Christian or any other creed I am above all an Indian. Our country is India, our nationality is Indian (*We, The Nation: The Last Decades* 320)

Parsis contribution to Indian English literature is beyond the nationality as they are the one of the first communities to have accepted English language education. The earliest example of Parsi' writing is 'Shah-Nama' by Firdaus. This work is important for Parsis as it includes their ancient historical knowledge. Some of the major earliest Parsi writers are Behram Malbari, Cornelia Sorabji, D.F. Karaka Jr. In their writings, Parsi identity is not much stressed. Identity is focused only in the second generation Parsi writers like Farrukh Dhondy, Bapsi Sidhwa, Rohinton Mistry, Dina Mehta, Firdaus Kanga, Boman Desai etc. This period has been a prolific one as for as the production of literary pieces, especially novels are concerned.

Even though the Parsi writers belong to a minority community, they established a prominent space in a dominant Indian culture. Most of their focus is on some of the social issues, which the Parsi community faces even today in India. There is an aching for diminishing

community is seen in these writers. Their intention was to preserve their community from extinction. V.L.V.N. Narendra Kumar aptly puts it:

Parsee novel in English, ie. Novel portraying Parsee life is a potent index of the Zoroastrian ethos. It voices the ambivalence, the nostalgia and the dilemma of the endangered, Parsee community. In Parsee novel in English, the 'Operative Sensibility' is Zoroastrian. The Parsee novelists have forged a dialect, which has a distinct ethnic character..... The triumph of the Parsee novelists in the use of English language is largely due to westernization and exposure to English culture. Their prose is interspersed with Persian words and Gujarati expressions. Besides being innovative, the Parsee novelists describe in detail, the esoteric rituals, and the Zoroastrian customs such as "Navjote". Thus, Parsee novel in English gives us a peep into the turbulent Parsee mind of today" (17-18).

Like other writers Mistry earnestly attempt to highlight the glories of their culture, restore lost values and give their own version of their social history. Mistry as a minority writer, his protagonist who is neither elitist nor overtly westernized. Parsis' feeling of insecurity, alienation, and nostalgia are dominated in this novel. According to N.S. Dharan, "Post-independent Parsi" writing in English is ethnocentric culture. Specific and community oriented (*Ethnic Atrophy Syndrome in Rohniton Mistry's Fiction* 7). Mistry's community consciousness comes to the fore when he makes his Parsi characters feel proud of their great old tradition.

Acknowledgements

I express my Sincere respect and gratitude to my family and friends who have given their valuable support, Cooperation and suggestion from time to time in Successfully completing this article.

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