

Parsi consciousness in the fiction of Rohinton Mistry

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ARTICLE DETAILS

Article History

Published Online: 25 May 2019

Keywords

Parsi consciousness, Diaspora, Social structure, Extinction, Cultural Heritage, Rohinton Mistry.

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ABSTRACT

Parsi one of the oldest religious community and rich culture is now on the verge of extinction. It is a matter of great concern not only for a social structure but also for the whole human civilization. With each passing year this condition is becoming graver and graver which compelled the Parsi writers to pen about their about to vanish cultural heritage and let the world enter into the Parsi thoughts and their way of life. Mistry as a prominent signature of Parsi diaspora is no exception to this fact. Mistry with his Parsi consciousness try to pen Parsi ethos and sensibilities to make world understand the Prasi cultural heritage; thus Mistry trying to create a living testament of Parsi culture.

1. Introduction

"I took a deep breath and listened to the old brag of my heart.

I am, I am, I am."

— Sylvia Plath

Parsi one of the oldest monolithic religion known for their unique rituals and customs, and their loving sprit to nature and Fire Temples. This rich culture of human civilization once flourished with full springs in Persia (now Iran) is now on the verge of extinction. It is very painful situation for Parsi writers, as they are seeing their vanishing community and heritage with each passing days. Their community is rapidly changing and seemed with more wrinkles, grown thinner and became more fragile; Sometimes, Parsi writers like Rohinton Mistry feeling more difficulty in picturing their community and Parsi faces accurately. But for Mistry, as a writer is a great responsibility of telling the truth, but it becomes more significant for him as his Parsi consciousness, is compelling his pen not only for sharing their tales but also preserves their culture and tradition with hisfiction. Rohinton Mistry is trying to prepare the living testament of Parsi lives and heritage. This is one of the remarkable thing of Mistry's fiction, as M. L. Pandit observes:

"[Mistry] tells us more about the Parsi community in Bombay than a book of sociology possibly could. What is more, Mistry is able to project the emotional life and personal relationships of the Parsis as a valuable part of the wider human experience at the international level of writing about these things from across the worlds. The Indian readers of Mistry will react to this book [his fiction] in their own way. For them, he presents an interesting slice of their own life, which for them is a most valued thing" (qtd in Heteren, 93)

Like in his first novel *Such a Long Journey*, Mistry examines the life of a handful of Parsi residents in India and in diaspora. In India, Hindus predominate, although society is officially secular in nature from the ages, that provides a safe shelter for Parsis and Jews, who were prosecuted all over the world; this culture allows them to flourish freely and practice

their rituals at their will. Though Parsis are a tiny, secretive religious minority in India but contribute a lot in the development of the country. The inhabitants of Khodadad Building in north of a city by sea (Bombay) are all Parsis; and living with a collective consciousness, and the protagonist Gustad Noble is seemed to be themost pious among them as symbolic to his name Nobel. At 6 am, Gustad begins his prayers in the Courtyard of the apartment complex; morning Parsi prayer *kusti* is the most important thing for a common Parsi, as it presents the dealing with the dailies of the protagonist's world. It unfailingly captures the fading ancient glory of the Parsis in general and of the Nobel's in particular, it is reflecting the religious-cultural concern of Mistry. Mistry has carefully described a verbal picture of a middle-class Parsi gentleman absorbed in his daily *kusti*:

He recited the appropriate sections and unknotted the *kusti* from around his waist. When he had unwound all nine feet of its slim, sacred, hand – woven length, he cracked it, whip-like: Once, twice, thrice. And thus was Ahriman, the evil one, driven away – with that expert flip of the wrists, possessed only by those who performed their *kusti* regularly (SLJ, 4)

Beside the rituals like *kusti* and the recitals of *YathaAhuVaryo* and *AshemVahoo*, Mistry takes his readers on a journey with his *Such a Long Journey*, of the Tower of Silence and the Fire Temples, places otherwise closed for the non-believers. The ethnocentric nature of his work discerns the assertion of difference and fragmentation of identity, creating its own space within the national and diasporic context. Mistry's own expatriate position makes him aware of the elements of alienation. He is an existential outsider on one hand, and on the other, "is on the periphery even in India"as NiluferBharucha puts it, "so his discourse challenges and resists the totalization of the dominant culture within India itself" (Bharucha, 25).

Mistry has portrayed the feelings and apprehensions of a minority community through some of the historical legends and events. The life style of Parsis living in Khodadad Building is the microcosm of the Parsis' in India. Mistry has exploited

Indian history to probe into broader concerns of Parsis in India in particular, and of national identity with fate in general; and the historically defining war of Indian history is the two major themes of his novel, and has taken much pain to reflect on these themes at personal sphere, social and national levels. The novel recounts the historic journey of the Parsi sect, that came to this land of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* all the way from Iran in the 7th Century A.D., and Gustad seems to be proud of his ancient roots, when he counters Malcom's argument that:

Christianity came to India over nineteen hundred years ago [...] but our prophet Zarathustra lived more than fifteen hundred years before your son of god was even born; a thousand years before the Buddha, two hundred years before Moses. And do you know how much Zoroastrians influenced Judaism, Christianity and Islam? (SLJ, 24)

Mistry with his Parsi consciousness, is skeptical about the declaration of the state emergency by Indira Gandhi in 1975, and centralizes the exclusions of the historiographers in his magnum opus *A Fine Balance*. The chronology of the narration makes it obvious; even, the partition of the subcontinent seems remote, only occasional references are made about it. Mistry is more concerned with chaos, murders, suicides, nasality – terrorist killing, deaths in police custody and so on, as the authorial feelings are conveyed distinctly in the epigraph of the novel:

Holding this book in your hand, sinking back in your soft armchair, you will say to yourself: Perhaps it will amuse me. And after you have read this story of great misfortunes, you will no doubt dine well, blaming the author for your own insensitivity, accusing him of wild exaggeration and flights of fancy. But rest assured; this tragedy is not a fiction. All is true. (AFB, epigraph)

All of the Mistry's novels, are set in the city of Mumbai, where Mistry was born and grew up in a cosmopolitan spirit, and narrate the story of a middle class Parsi family living through domestic crises. Through one family, Mistry conveys everything from the dilemmas among Indian Parsis', Persian – descended Zoroastrians, to the wider concerns of corruption and communalism that are embraced into the air of the nation. Mistry writes in simple language using a lot of dialogues and conversations, though the novel is very bulky in size, but it is the most compassionate book by Mistry.

Mistry has portrayed the life of a middle class Parsi family of Bombay, the focus of his third novel *Family Matters* has shifted from the 1970s the years of the Emergency to the more recent times of twenty first century. The ShivSena is still around the novel, but the time of the novel is the Post-Babri Masjid incident in Bombay. According to the common Indian Parsi, India is becoming a corrupt country, and Mistry as a Parsi exposes the corrupt condition of India in the following line:

Corruption is in the air we breathe. This nation specializes in turning honest People into crooks. (FM, 30)

Coomy points out the dangers lurking indoors and outdoors in the present scenario; she talks about the burning down at an old Parsi couple by rioting Hindu mobs, under the mistaken impression that seeing Muslims had been given shelter in that building. She also points out that "Bombay burnt for months after the razing of the mosque in Ayodhya. How often does a mosque in Ayodhya turn people onto savages in Bombay? Once in a blue moon" (FM, 5). Coomy also talks about the danger that not just Parsis but also the senior citizens of Bombay are experiencing the threats and also been killed for the monetary gains, as Jal says, "Just last week in FirozshaBaag an old lady was beaten and robbed inside her own flat. Poor thing is barely clinging to life at Parsi General" (FM, 5).

Mistry penned a new kind of narrations, where he took his own cultural canvas and put his disturbed or portable roots, and draw some narrative lines on the wide horizon of life, and make it more real as he has experienced once, and also makes his readers to feel so; but sometimes, his realities become unbearable for many but as a true narrator, he creates the world as he perceived in, his characters are not mere images or ideas or reason for curiosity, but a real life like individuals with their own eccentricities and own versions of realities. Mistry's fictions can also be define under the fictions disguised as history because of his documentation of Parsi life and their thinking, as Mistry claims:

I was then curious to see how I'd fare with a novel. The central plot incident in *Such a Long Journey* was taken from something I'd heard my parents and their friends talking about in 1971, at home. A Parsee major had embezzled money from a bank to finance the resistance movement in East Pakistan. Within our community the main question was 'How could a Parsee have done this?' (Lambert, 6)

Mistry uses his art of narration as a medium to express and to promote the Parsi version of life and history. That is the reason of his all Parsi protagonists, and his native Bombay as the permanent place of action. Bombay is keep coming in the process of his narrations because Bombay resembles as the second home and epicenter of Parsi culture and life, as Mistry admits:

Though the story takes place in Bombay, many of the challenges the main characters face are universal, the resolutions they come to sharply and recognizably human: You don't have to be Parsi or Indian to identify with his characters and the dilemmas they face. (Richards, web)

Mistry try to narrate the history of his community in fictional terms; through his books, he presents his community with a fair share in doing so, Mistry added to the emerging body of his diasporic literature which may be termed as community – literature of consciousness. Mistry with his insight and Parsi consciousness captured anxieties, dilemmas, and concerns of his respective community through his fictional world, voiced history by doing so consciously or unconsciously. During the process, Mistry empowered his society by grounding the issues and concerns of his community; in the social fabric of his

fictional world, Mistry weaved in his community lifewithin the multi-dimensional co-existence in his unique individual manners: saga of their lives and community consciousness. I would like to end all my arguments with the quote of Jack London, which is aptly justifying the Mistry's consciousness:

The proper function of man is to live, not to exist. I shall not waste my days in trying to prolong them. I shall use my time.

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Abbreviations:

SLJ : Such a Long Journey
 AFB: A Fine Balance
 FM: Family Matters