

A Study of Parsi Culture and Search of Identity by the Characters in Rohinton Mistry's Novels

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Abstract

This paper presents Parsis as a minority community who feel sense of insecurity, anxiety, atrophy and threat in a dominated culture in different time periods. Rohinton Mistry's novels deal with the life of Indians who suffer from communal disharmony, religious Chauvinism, ethnicity and cultural diversities. Such a Long Journey records the anxieties, uneasiness, problems and the distinct identity of a Parsi community within the boundary of India and tried to preserve the ethnic identity of the community. The novel mainly focus on realistic picture of the minority community like Parsis who became the victims of the political uncertainties. Mistry raises some problems of community and cultural crisis which are the main issues under the subaltern studies. There is a message that race, ethnicity or majority are controlling factors on the ideology and cultural make up of particular place where cultural diversity exists. The drift between ethnic culture and majority culture often gives rise to unrest in the national life as well as social structure. It is necessary to steam out the hatred, religious chauvinism and misconceptions through proper channels.

Keywords: Parsi Community, Religious Chauvinism, Sense of Insecurity, Anxiety, Ethnicity, Cultural Crisis, Uncertainties, Ethnic Identity, Misconceptions.

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INTRODUCTION

Rohinton Mistry, a contemporary Parsi writer, aims at examining historical events and the way they impacted on individuals and communities as a whole in the post – independent period. India is a country which is known for its incredible religious and cultural diversity but this diversity often leads to anarchism where some cultures get dominated and others dominate. Post- independence Parsi writing in English is ethnocentric. Obviously, their literature is characterized by both ethnocentric and minority discourse features. It depicts all concerns of the modern day Parsis who are the miniscule minority in India, experiences ethnic anxieties. They feel identity crisis, insecurity, and feel threatened by possible submersion in the dominant Hindu culture, and a feeling of nightmarish which they do not ever want to come true. Besides these issues like insecurity, threat and identity crisis, there are other disturbing ethnic features such as declining population, late marriages, low birth rate, high rate of divorce, attitudes to the girl child, alienation, urbanization etc. All these issues find

expression in the post - independence Parsi writers. Literature is a powerful tool in the hands of writers who use it to modulate and change societal framework. Mistry in his works seeks to contribute the process of change and reconsideration of minorities, their rights and status, and radical restructuring of a social thought. He like other Parsi writers distributes the world which is free of dominance and hierarchy, a world that rests on the principles of Justice and equality. It has been observed that race, ethnicity or majority are controlling factors on the ideology and cultural make up of particular place where cultural diversity exists. The drift between ethnic culture and majority culture often gives rise to unrest in the national life as well as social structure. It is necessary to steam out the hatred, religious chauvinism and misconceptions through proper channels.

Parsis in India

Work deal with their human protagonists". (A. K. Singh :66)

Parsis are an ethno - religious minority in India. Although they are minority in India, their

contribution to society, economics, commerce, science, politics and literature has been remarkable. They are small, yet united religious community. In India, they live mostly on the West Coast of subcontinent especially in Mumbai. The Parsis are the followers of Prophet Zoroaster and their religion is known as Zoroastrianism. The original Homeland of the Parsis, an ancient Persian province, is located at present in Southern Iran. They left their Homeland to preserve their religion from being Islamized by the invading Islamic Arabians. It also reflects the characteristic spirit of adaptability of this minority community which made possible for them to flourish in India where such diverse cultures and religions exist.

Such a Long Journey

The novel *Such a Long Journey* is a unique in the sense that it is based on factual events. On the surface, the novel deals with the Gustad's and the Parsi Community but in reality, it covers the major events of post-independent Indian history. Factually, the novel is written somewhat in the manner of non-fiction based on real events and real people. Mistry has interwoven facts and fiction in the fabric in such a way that the novel can be called a *faction*. Besides, the history, the Parsi Community, their fear and anxieties as a minority are also echoed in the story. The concern of identity of the Parsis through the exploration of their preoccupations and firmness on cultural heritage is reflected in the novel. The novelist not only describes the fears and anxieties of his vocal, but also passive community which has not only lived peacefully in the vast extensive Indian society, and has accepted the land and contributed to its growth, even though maintained its own cultural and communal specificity.

Although, Gustad the protagonist is shown performing and loyally following Parsi traditions and customs, he considers all religions equal. He believes prayer as an instrument to get peace and illumination. The matter of Identity is obviously cleared through various incidents, one of such is the typical Parsi game *Kaakerya Kumar* which *Dinshawji* plays with his Wife in the novel. The ancient origin of the Parsi Community is figured out in the dialogue between *Malcolm* and *Gustad* to prove their supremacy over others. The conversation between two discloses an important feeling of minorities to sustain their ancient roots and culture to boost their self - image. *Gustad* living in *Khodadad Building*, eagerly wishes that his son *Sohrab* should be world famous so that he can bring fame to the Parsi community as whole and himself also. In fact, such anxiety for identity on both individual and community level is evident throughout the novel. It is clearly visible in their speech that *Gustad* is continuously disturbed by rising tide of communalism in the post independent India. *Rohinton Mistry* even expresses his anger against *Maratha's* attitude for changing the names. He thought that changing the names means changing identity.

The primary motif of Mistry is to record the anxieties, uneasiness, problems and the distinct identity of a Parsi community within the boundary of India like all other Parsi writers, and he tried his best for the preservation of the ethnic identity of his community. In *Such a Long Journey*, Mistry takes responsibility as a representative and mouthpiece of the Parsi community, in order to realize how the post-colonial conditions affects the community's identity. Apart from concern of religion, the historical awareness forms the shape of the collective identity of the Parsi community. Better to have full understanding of *Such a Long Journey*, it is important to know the history of the Parsi community. Incidents in the novel like *Indira Gandhi* in political trouble, *Nagarwala* incident, *Indira Gandhi's* guiltiness of corruption and murder etc. are narrated from the perspective of Parsi community. Thus, Mistry's agenda to present the historical knowledge has great significance from the view of minority community. *Nagarwala* case is orally transmitted as it claims for the value of indigenous cultural practices. Mistry collided the history and fiction to specifies the self-image of the post - colonial Indian nation. Even though the Parsi Community is threatened by the politics of Hindu nationalism, so, writing against the main stream is an option for the minority which is marginalized and facing extinction.

Such a long journey is a fine novel written in 1991, set against the backdrop of political events in India during 1970s. Mistry set this novel at a very crucial point in contemporary Indian history when the Nehruvian era had just ended after *Nehru's* sudden death, and soon enter into the deteriorate politics of violence, opportunism and favouritism. In period 1962-1972, India had to take on three successive wars, with China, Pakistan, and for the liberation of Bangladesh. This period also witnessed the rise of communal politics, the emergence of new political policies, politics of votes by the dominant Hindu or Brahmin community of India. The novel deals with the issues like fear and sense of insecurity which *Gustad*, the protagonist, feels throughout the novel. Mistry depicts of his community's relation to political fundamentalist activities and its effects on minority community like on Parsis. The theme of *such a long journey* revolves around history, politics and the common anxieties of a middle - class man *Gustad Noble*.

The realization of the waste of *Sohrab's* talents and the loss of opportunity and hope, especially in a country where minorities are not at ease is very painful and sense of insecurity for *Gustad*. The fear, anxiety and the sense of insecurity the minorities feel from the fundamentalists and fanatics like the *Shiv Sena* in Bombay or the Hindu fundamentalists like *Bajrang Dal* when early 1970s witnessed the growth of the *Shiv Sena* with its demand for *Maratha Raj*. We have got this expression in these words of *Gustad*.

What kind of life was Sohrab going to look forward to? No future for minorities, with all these fascist Shiv Sena politics and Marathi language nonsense. It was going to be like the black people in America-twice as good as the white man to get half as much. How could he make Sohrab understand this?

This statement reveals Gustad's psychological fear and sense of insecurity about his son's future and life. He thinks that there is no future for minorities in this country because of fascist activities like Shiv Sena and Bajrang Dal who fights only for Marathi people and Marathi language. Such fascist ideology reduced them as black people in America.

There is another character Dinshawji, a friend of Gustad who also expresses his fear and grief over the matter of changing names under the pressure of Shiv Sena. For him, names are not only names but an identity and changing names means changing identity. Dinshawji reacts to Gustad's question, "What in a name?". He counter asserts that renaming is an infliction of linguistic violence on social identity, the erasure of family names connected with the colonial past is seen as an erasure of a personal historical connectedness.

Mistry, as mouthpiece of Parsi community, has shown his anger and sense of insecurity towards Indian politics and Indian politicians like Nehru, Indira Gandhi and towards politics of Shivsena of the period. As Parsis feel that Nehru never liked Feroze Gandhi from the beginning do not believe in natural death of Feroze Gandhi. Even they think that the heart attack on Feroze Gandhi was not real reason of his death. They suspect about his death and cherished a sense of insecurity. Dilnavaz and Dinshawji has always doubt on the death of Feroze Gandhi as Nehru never liked him as his son-in-law from the beginning. Dilnavaz as expresses her doubt, Dinshawji agrees and says: 'That was tragic', "Even today people say Feroze's heart attack was not really a heart says: 'That was tragic', "Even today people say Feroze's heart attack was not really a heart attack." This is how Parsi men and women expresses their sense of insecurity in India in Such a Long Journey.

They are also reluctant towards Mrs. Indira Gandhi as they were towards Nehru because she made Nationalization of banks throughout the country. This decision makes them to lose their banking business as they were private bank holders. This action of Indira goes against Parsi community who not happy with the decision of Indira Gandhi. In the novel Dinshawji says to Gustad in this connection and recollects the past status of Parsis as: "What those days were, yaar. What fun we used to have. Touched corner his lips to wipe the foam. Parsis were the kings of banking in those days. Such respect we used to get. Now the whole

atmosphere only has been spoiled. Ever since that Indira nationalized banks."

This decision disowned them from their old business and make the to feel a kind of restlessness of a community. Gustad is of the view that "nowhere in the world nationalization worked". He opines that the banks have not worked anywhere but it has been done as to get political mileage at the cost of the interests of the Parsi bankers. He charged that her action of demanding separate Maharashtra and all these policies is because of supporting racist buggers and Shiv Sena which results riots, and regrets that they (Parsis) remained as a second-class citizen in the country.

Thereafter Major was asked to write a confession which he did without a second thought trusting the PM. But as soon as the money was received, the PM's office blocked the money before it was used for the aimed purpose. By knowing the trick, the Major kept ten lakh rupees aside for his friend. He was implicated and arrested on the charges of corruption and stealing the money.

However, what began to raise suspicions at the time, and what was never adequately explained, was the hasty and highly unorthodox manner in which Captain Nagarwala's trial was conducted. Three different judges presided over the case in just three days, at the end of which he was sentenced to four years imprisonment. The police failed to produce in court the tape they claimed to have of Nagarwala's remarkable impersonation of Mrs. Gandhi, and contradictions between his story and that of the State Cashier were never investigated. Moreover, after his arrest, Nagarwala appears to have had a change of heart. From prison, he appealed for a retrial and tried unsuccessfully to gain an interview with a journalist and fellow Parsi from a Bombay weekly newspaper.

A few months later Nagarwala was removed to hospital, allegedly complaining of chest pains, where he died in March 1972. The incident, as it involved a Parsi, jolted the image of the whole community. It was a big blow to the Parsis image as a very loyal, upright and dependable community. Mistry has taken the Nagarwala incident of this forgery as his major plot in the novel, only to defend his community against the corrupt and unscrupulous government of Mrs. Gandhi. It is clearly depicted by Mistry that Major Bilimoria is a good person who is falsely implicated in this case, an innocent man victimized by the mean and crooked authorities of the government. Mistry seems to have anger against them who try to ruin benign identity of the Parsis. Nagarwala incident makes clear that the Parsis do not like the involvement of any of their community members in any scandal which may defame their community as whole or as a particular. Maja Daruwala reveals what the community felt about such a blot on their image at that time: The Nagarwala

incident, because it involved a Parsi, jolted the self-image of the community no less. Having long ago lost their literature to the vandalism of Alexander the accursed, and their dance, music, art, poetry and even their language to the process of adapting to a new home in India the Parsis have developed a particularized culture culled from a mixture of ancient myth and legend overlaid by a life-sustaining sense of recent achievement. Gratified to have earned an honourable place in the country of their adoption through their contribution to every field of endeavour and proud of having retained a strong ethical tradition the Parsis were deeply anguished by the ambivalent role Nagarwala had played in the sordid story. Gustad stands for the marginalized in the novel and challenges the hegemony of the country. It is a significant attempt at self-assertion, which is typical of all post-colonial literatures.

Through protagonist of the Novel namely Gustad, Mistry expresses the sense of insecurity and apprehensions of the Parsi community. He attempts to depict the Parsis predicament as minority community in India. Anjana Desai rightly comments on the incident as, "However, these events and the sinister mystery surrounding them serve mainly as a narrative link and a story-telling device". Mistry underlying his world-view which is expressed through one of his mouthpieces, the pavement artist. One of the most important message Mistry wants to emphasize is religious tolerance on the basis of that all religions are equal. The wall enclosing the Khodadad building gives a sense of security and protection to the inhabitants of building. Gustad who likes the wall as the "sole provider of privacy, especially for Jimmy and Gustad when they did their 'kustis' at dawn. Over six feet high, the wall ran the length of the compound, sheltering them from non-Parsi eyes while they prayed with the glow spreading in the east". As Nilufer Bharucha voices similarly:

The wall both includes and excludes. It is protective as well as reductive. It protects the Parsis community from the ingress of the engulfing Indian world. However, it also makes this world isolationist. The wall is often used as a public urinal and polluted by the passers-by. The whole apartment annoyed by the malodor, it spreads, Gustad, in an insightful flash, invites the commercial pavement artist to use it as his canvas and adorn it with the murals of different gods and goddesses of India from all religions.

They assert their identity in quite a benign way by revering the 'others' faith privately as well as publicly; and at the same time keeping their 'self-respect' intact. In the history of their In India, being Diaspora, they have never been aggressive against any other faith. Although every religion has its own identity, in fact, they have been tolerant not only of the Hindu majority but also of other minorities like the Muslims and the Christians. But at the same time, they

are watchful enough to maintain the purity of their race by keeping to endogamy and also to resist proselytization with strict 'NO'. The Parsis have been successful in framing a positive identity by keeping a fine balance between assimilation and resistance that respects the differences of the others including its own in the multicultural existential reality of the country.

Protagonist of Family Matters

Gustad never turns a bigot like Yezad in Family Matters because of the compassion deep seated within his heart and mind. He visits Mount Mary and prays for Roshan and Dinshawji so faithfully and wholeheartedly for their health and for the miracle to happen as "Gustad had learned more about the Church, how it had a tradition of welcoming Parsis, Muslims, Hindus, regardless of caste or creed. Mother Mary helped everyone; she made no religious distinctions". Thus, Mistry is sensitive about his community, their uneasiness and threat in different times in India which he raised through his novel such a long journey as Jaydipsinh Dodiya said: "Mistry is sensitive to the various anxieties felt by his community. He has demonstrated this by responding to the existing threats to the Parsi family and community in particular, and to the country in general. He presents his community through the different narratives of the characters who invariably express their concerns for their community and the changes that affect them."

CONCLUSION

Mistry records atrophy, anxiety, uneasiness, sense of insecurity, ethnicity and feeling of threat in his community through his novel such a long journey. There is a message that race, ethnicity or majority are controlling factors on the ideology and cultural make up of particular place where cultural diversity exists. The drift between ethnic culture and majority culture often gives rise to unrest in the National life as well as social structure. It is necessary to steam out the hatred, religious chauvinism and misconceptions through proper channels. Mistry in his works seeks to contribute the process of change and reconsideration of minorities, their rights and status, and radical restructuring of a social thought. He like other Parsi writers distributes the world which is free of dominance and hierarchy, a world that rests on the principles of Justice and equality.

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