

The Portrayal of Parsi Culture and Religion in Rohinton Mistry's *Such a Long Journey*

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Indian English Literature in English originated as a necessary outcome of the introduction of English education in India under colonial rule. By Indian English Writing, we mean that body of literature which is written by Indians in English. It could be in the form of poetry, prose, fiction or drama. It is now recognized that Indian English literature is not only part of commonwealth literature, but also occupies a great importance in the world literature. Among the twentieth century writers Rohinton Mistry is an Indian born Canadian short-story writer and a novelist. He has become one of the pre-eminent writers of the post-colonialist writing movement. He now lives in Toronto, but sets his novels primarily in his native Bombay, presenting an honest and loving image of India. As a Parsi, Mistry is part of a dwindling community of fewer than 1,25,000 people worldwide, most of whom are concentrated around Bombay.

Parsis are descended from the religious followers of Zoroastrianism who fled from Iran to avoid forced conversion to Islam. While India offers them a safe haven, present day Parsis are subject to marginalization. Mistry grew up in this charged atmosphere in a Parsi area of Bombay. Mistry published his first book, a collection of short stories called *Tales From Firozsha Baag* in 1987, released in the United States two years later with the alternate title *Swimming Lessons and other stories from Firozsha Baag*. This work was shortlisted for Canada's Governor General Award for best fiction. When his second novel, *Such A long Journey*, was published in 1991, it won the Governor General's Award, the commonwealth writers prize for best book. It was short listed for the Prestigious Booker Prize. Mistry's third novel, *A Fine Balance* (1995), won the annual Giller prize and the Los Angeles Times book prize for fiction. His fourth novel, *Family Matters* (2002) was short listed for the booker Prize.

Rohinton Mistry is an expatriate Indian-Parsi writer who lives in Canada. As a Parsi and also a immigrant in Canada, he look at him as a symbol of double displacement and this sense of displacement is a recurrent theme in his literary works. His historical situation includes development of new identity in the nation to which he has migrated and a complex relationship with political and cultural history of the nation he has left behind. Generally Indian Diasporas suffers from a sense of triple displacement. They lose their native place, they enter into an alien language and find themselves among people whose culture and codes are different and sometimes offensive to their own.

Mistry's books portray diverse facets of Indian socio-economic life, as well as Parsi Zoroastrian life, customs and religion. Many of his writings are marked as "Indo-nostalgic". His works propose to look at the anguish Parsi way of live and also wrapped up in thick coverings of Parsi ethnicity with the essence of Parsi spirit. Parsi people were persecuted in their homeland in Persia because of their distinct religious identity. They were provided with refuge in India many centuries ago. They had contributed much to the economy, politics and Society of India. Parsis proved themselves as an example for the rich society of India.

Being the miniscule minority in India, the Parsis do experience ethnic anxiety, they feel insecure, experience identity crisis and feel threatened by possible submersion in the dominant Hindu culture, a nightmarish prospect which they do not ever want to come true. Along with these, there are other disturbing features namely : declining population, late marriages, low birth rate, high rate of divorce, attitudes to the girl child, urbanization, alienation etc., All these issues find expression in the post independence Parsi writing in English.

Mistry's characters, represent the Parsi Community, whose identity has been historically problematized. It is a progressive community with a glorious past and a dismal future. Mistry attempts at giving details about the lifestyles and culture of the Parsis wherever he gets an opportunity in his fiction. Commenting about this Silvia Albertazzi her Companion to Indian Fiction states that:

First of all, he tries to show the uniqueness of the Parsi Community by focusing on their way of living and their Cultural heritage. Then, he stresses the diasporic nature of Parsi Social and historic experience, seeking the justification and the sense of his own story of migration in the perspective of the Parsi 'double displacement'. (276-277)

As a chronicler of Parsi Community, Mistry is keenly aware of his Community's predicament. In the recent years, a large numbers of young Parsis have chosen to migrate to the West, Mistry who belongs to them also hopes to, recover a life of comfort and pride. All the works of Mistry foregrounds the heterogeneity of identity within Parsi Community and the dynamic nature of Parsi community itself.

Such A Long Journey is based upon real events which is set in 1971 during the Indira Gandhi administration. Set during the time of the India-Pakistan war, its protagonist is not a conventional hero. Gustad Noble is a bank clerk and a family man who belongs to the Parsi community, a vulnerable figure whose world is haunted by the war with China in 1962. Mistry strikes the opposition between the values of family and tradition and the corruption of the outside world.

Noble has to experience a complete upheaval of his life owing to sudden blowing up of politics in his smooth everyday routine.

Gustad belongs to the Parsi community and a devoted family man struggling to keep his wife Dilnavaz and three children out of poverty. The crisis and turmoil begins in his family when his eldest son Shorab refuses to join the prestigious Indian Institute of Technology and his youngest daughter Roshan falls ill. Gustad later on receives a letter from an old friend Major Billmoria pulls him to involve in the corruption of large amount of money. Thus the long journey of Gustad starts by shedding new light on all the aspects of both personal and political life of him.

Such A Long Journey is a unique attempt novel based on truth in Indian Fiction in English. The protagonist has the feelings of loss and insecurity with several chastening experiences. The novel is multi-layered which gives importance only to social and political details, as Mistry symbolizes on a middle class family of the Parsi community who lives in Bombay. The political theme of the novel is based on the notorious Nagarwala Conspiracy case of 1971. It is a real story that took place during Indira Gandhi's period in which Shorab Nagarwala, the chief cashier of the Parliament in the State Bank of India followed the highest forces in the country, found himself behind bar and died later in imprisonment. Supporting this Amiritjit Singh in Writers of Indian Diaspora states that:

Like his short stories, Mistry's multi layered novel is about power and powerlessness, about the need for community in which the individual's voice is not muffled. Such A Long Journey is primarily the story of Gustad Noble, the little man holds on to his dignity, strength, and humanity in a sweltering tide of disappointment, confusion, betrayal, and corruption. (214)

Mistry is well-versed with all the under currents of Indian politics. As his novels are closely linked with the social and political back ground, there has been a wide spread growth in his writings. If we read his novel from the political point of view, we can realize that his knowledge on Indian politics is not at all far though he had left India 30 years back and settled in Canada. Mistry being a Parsi writer is very sensitive to the anxieties felt by the community. He proves this by giving response to the existing threats of Parsi community. His characters express their concern for their community and also the changes that affect them.

Gustad had full hope on his eldest son Sohrab, who is a bright and intelligent boy. He was very much excited that Shorab has got admission in the Indian Institute of Technology, but when he refused to join I.I.T. It leads to anger and bitterness and a break in the

relationship between the father and son. At the dinner Sohrab states that:

I'm sick and tired of IIT, IIT, IIT all the time. I'm not interested in it. I'm not a jolly good fellow about it, and I'm not going there.... Fool yourself if you want to. (48)

Gustad was sad and angry because of his son's betrayal. Other bitterness and supposed 'betrayal' for Gustad was his best friend Major Jimmy Bilmoria, who lives in Khodadad building. Bilmoria had disappeared one morning without any information. Later Gustad comes to know that he had gone to join RAW, a wing of Indian Intelligence Service. Due to the sudden vanish of his friend Gustad starts doubting their friendship.

...What happened to the great friend Jimmy Bilmoria? Our Major uncle? Where is he now, who used to come here all the time? Who I treated like brother? Gone! Disappeared! Without saying a word to us. That's friendship. Worthless and meaningless!. (49)

The inhabitants in Khodadad building are all a good representatives of cross-section middle class Parsis depicting the angularities of dwindling community.

J.G. Duresh in his review of political motifs in Rohinton Mistry's novels exposes as:

Consequently, his Indian perceptions are coloured by his (Mistry) community consciousness and even by prejudices which are peculiar to the Parsi race. In short, among the Parsi writers who write about India, Mistry is the one who is hypercritical about even the frivolous political occurrences that may seem to affect the life of Parsi in India. (96)

The Parsis also feel insecure because of the growing political power in Bombay. Thus Dinshawji says Gustad, "Wait till the Marathas take over, then we will have the real Gandoo Raj... All they know is to have rallies at shivaji park, shout slogans, make threats and change road names" (75). Dilnavas has always doubt on the death of Feroze Gandhi as Nehru never liked him as his son-in-law Feroze Gandhi from the beginning. Thus Dinshawji agrees and says. "Even today people say Feroze's heart attack was not really a heart attack." (197). Thus all the members of their community feel insecure in India in Such A Long Journey.

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. The novel also focuses on the customs

and rituals of Parsi community. Dinshawji tells Gustad about Indira Gandhi's Nationalization of Bank :

What days those were, yaar. What fun we used to have ... 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 the banks. (38)

Nationalization of the banks was at that time inevitable in the larger interest of the downtrodden masses of India. Mrs. Indira Gandhi's decision would have displeased the Parsis who were the owners of private banks but she did not have any selfish motive in Nationalization of banks.

Like other Parsi writers, Mistry's work is guided by the experience of double displacement. As a Parsi, Mistry finds himself at the margins of Indian society and hence his writing challenges and resists absorption by the dominating and Hindu-glorifying culture of India. He has experimented with linguistic hybridity and celebrates the use of Parsi language. The post-colonial concern for him is not only to fight for a cultural territory but also to create a distinct identity of their own. He focuses on the human condition, location in time and space, the Parsi middle class in Suburban Bombay and rural migrants. The feeling of being left out of the cultural mainstream is uniquely reflected in the way Mistry's characters are displaced and search for new identity, through emigration or reinventing themselves through religious enlightenment.

In the Parsi English novel, Jaydipsinh Dodiya remarks about Mistry as:

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. (44-45)

To conclude, the novel *Such A Long Journey* also describes the different idiosyncrasies and ethno centricities of Parsi community. The last epigraph of the novel is taken from Rabindranath Tagore's *Gitanjali*:

And the old words die out on the tongue, new melodies break forth from the heart; and were the old tracks are lost, new country is revealed with its wonder. (SALJ)

About the novel the critic Uma Parameshwaran comments that:

Rohinton Mistry's *Such A Long Journey* (1991) has recently won the Governor General's award and the Commonwealth Prize. Its strengths lie in the authentic and delineation of Parsi customs and way of life, the nobility of the central figure Gustad Noble and the finely crafted language and prose style (23).

The Parsis revere the sun, moon, fire, water, earth, and all creations of God. In Zoroastrian religion fire is considered sacrosanct. Fire worshipped in all forms from the sun to the household fire, and no Zoroastrian worship is complete without it. Being a Parsi himself, Rohinton Mistry is aware of the rites and rituals of his religion. The novel is strewn with words from Parsi life, like Kusti, dustoorji, loban, Gomez etc., which create the atmosphere. These words relate to the Parsi life which a non-Parsi may find difficult to grasp. Thus Sunitha Srinivas says in her *Functionalism and Indian English Fiction* about the novel as:

The novel deals with an authentic portrayal of the Parsis, and the customs and rituals related to their community. The novelist accustoms one to another way of life, and graphically describes the Parsi religious customs, prayers, and funeral rites. The cultural distinctiveness is asserted through the use of untranslated, specifically Parsi words. (147)

Living in Toronto for the last 27 years, Mistry has remained deeply rooted to his native place India. All his four books are set in Bombay which recreates and agonize the homesick exile. All his novels are textured skillfully with passionate stories of native India. Mistry now in Canada looks at India with a pang of nostalgia and recalls to his mind some of the bitter experiences of his Parsi brethren in India.

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