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Parsi Fiction in Rohinton Mistry's Such a Long journey

Abstract: such a long journey is the first novel written by Rohinton Mistry, a writer of Indian Diaspora, who settled in Canada. Though the novel was published sixteen years after Rohinton Mistry has settled in Toronto, it has no trace of Canada. Rather, it reveals the author's deep concern for the Parsis in India in Particular, and for the development of postcolonial India in general. This feeling may not be explained with the word 'nostalgia' which is loosely associated with romantic feelings. Rohinton Mistry's feeling for India is not just longing for the past, but a mixed feeling of unpleasant jolt when the Parsi community felt hurt at the Nagarwala incident and the restoring the honor of the Parsi community through a realistic portrayal of the said incident was the basis of the novel. During the regime of Indira Gandhi in India, one Parsi gentleman Mr. Nagarwala was accused of imitating Indira Gandhi's voice while talking over the phone to the chief cashier of a nationalized bank from where he took sixty lakh rupees presumably for the fighters in Bangladesh. Mr. Nagarwala was pronounced guilty by the court and the entire Parsi community felt shocked and disgraced. Rohinton Mistry 's pride for his community, which had been maintaining a high moral standard and which had secured a

prestigious position in the past, got hurt and he decided to take revenge on Indira Gandhi through his fiction.

Key Words: Parsi, Nostalgia, regime.

The rise of Parsi fiction is a common feature in the literary scenario of postcolonial India and Pakistan. A galaxy of Parsi writers-Dina Mehta, Firdaus Kanga, Keki Daru-Walla, Bapsi Sidhwa, Rohinton Mistry and Boman Desai-have enriched the English literature in Indian subcontinent during the last three decades of the 20th century. Some of these writers have settled in America and Canada, and yet they express their concern for the Parsi community to which they belong. The word Parsi, meaning a native of 'pars' (now in southern Iran), is an ethnic term. The religion of the Parsis is Zoroastrianism, founded by Zarathustra around 2000B.C. the date is however disputed, as some historians claim that it was founded in 7000 or 8000 B.C. While others view that, it was around 600B.C. whatever be the exact time of Zarathustra, his followers continued to practice the ancient monotheistic religion long after they had been forced to leave their original land after the conquest of Iran by Arab. A group of Parsi refugee arrived on the western coast of Indian subcontinent in the eighth century. They landed in the port of Sanjan in Gujarat, which was then ruled by King Jadhav Rana. Their Priest (dastur) appealed to the king for permission to settle there. They were allowed to settle in Gujarat with five conditions imposed on them. They adopted the Gujarati language; their women were to wear sari; their men were to handover weapons; they were to venerate the cow and their marriage ceremonies were to be performed at night only. Proselytizing was also strictly prohibited. The Parsis followed these instructions and began to live in India as a secluded community. Though they did not merge in the mainstream, loyalty to the ruler of the day became a characteristic trait of their community. During the colonial period, they were the first to learn English language and could hold a prestigious position in the national scenario. The rise of Parsi novel is a direct outcome of their English language education at an early stage. As the Parsis could maintain their rich heritage, it became obvious that they would project this distinctness in their fictions.

Such a Long Journey projects the life –style and problems of one Parsi family living in a Parsi colony. Gustad, The protagonist of the novel, is introduced through his morning prayer:

The first light of morning barely illumined the sky as Gustad Noble faced eastward to offer his orisons to Ahura Mazda. The hour was approaching six, and up in the compound's solitary tree the sparrow began to call. Gustad listened to their chirping every morning while reciting his 'kusti'prayers ...Gustad Noble eased his prayer cap slightlyThe black velvet of the cap contrasted starkly with his cinereous sideburns. Through these lines Mistry explained about the protagonist Gustad's prayer in detail. The way he put on 'kusti'and uttered his prayers would give a non –Parsi a clear idea of Parsi ritual:

Gustad finished retying the 'Kusti' round his waist and noted with satisfaction that the two ends, as usual, were of equal length. He raised and lowered his shoulders to let his 'sudra' settle comfortably around him....He turned his face to the sky, eyes closed, and began reciting the sarosh Baaji, silently forming the words with his lips....There was nothing he disliked more than to permit a break in his morning prayers. Bad manners, that is what it was. He would not rudely interrupt when talking to another human being, so why do it with dada Ormuzd?

Ahura Mazda or 'wise Lord's the absolute, omnipotent, eternal God proclaimed by Zoroaster or Zarathustra. Ahura Mazda is both the creator as well as the judge on the day of the last judgement. Zarathustra preached the monotheistic religion of the one supreme God, Ahura Mazda. His message is positive, life-affirming and based on strong moral stand.According to him, the whole universe is dominated by two primal forces, Good and evil-'Spenta Mainyu'and 'Angra Mainyu'-and an individual's duty is to make a choice between the two. The supreme God Ahura Mazda combines with Spenta Mainyu to become the principle of good represented as 'Ohrmazd.'Gustad's prayer to Ahura Mazda and to dada Ormuzd,his strong moral stand as is manifested in his decisions, his participation in all the formalities in the Tower of silence –all these are specific Parsi activities that have enriched the novel. On the other hand, Gustad's hesitation in buying beef from Craefordv market may be interpreted in terms of the Parsis in the eighth century. The Parsis were asked to venerate the cow and due to this condition, traditional Parsis still do not eat beef, though there are no religious taboos against the eating of beef. Gustad would eat beef but he did not like to be exposed as eater of beef outside his community. Therefore, he was anxious that while carrying the raw meat from the market, meat juices must not drip from his basket, causing the vegetarians; protest. Gustad's belonging to minority community is repeatedly referred to in the course of the novel. His friend Malcolm, who had

taught him how to buy beef, always said: “lucky for us that we are minorities in a nation of Hindus. Let them eat pulses and grams and beans, spiced with their stinky asafetida-what they call ‘hing.’ Let them fart their lives away. The modernized Hindus eat mutton. On the other hand, chicken, if they want to be more fashionable. However, we will get our protein from their sacred cow.’Gustad’s faith in Zoroastrianism is also asserted. When Malcolm would take him to church on Sundays on their way to Crawford Market, Gustad was on his guard. Conditioned as he had been from childhood to resist the call of other faiths.’All religions were equal, he was taught: nevertheless, one had to remain true to one’s own because religions were not like garment styles that could be changed at whim or to follow fashion.”

No future for minorities, with 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.

It was quite natural that the minorities, who are negligible in number, become terrified at the rise of fanaticism. A common Parsi’s anxiety is best revealed through Dishawji’s humorous remarks. Remembering the contribution of the Parsis to the banking system in India.

She (Indira Gandhi) is a shrewd woman; these are vote-getting tactics. Showing the poor, she is on their side....Remember when her pappy was prime minister and he made her president of congress party. At once, she began encouraging the demands of separate Maharashtra. How much bloodshed. How much rioting she caused. Moreover, today we have that bloody Shiv Sena, wanting to make the rest of us into second-class citizens. Do not forget, she started it all by supporting the racist buggers. He even attributed the bad manners of ‘dubbawala’ to the rise of communal parties such as Shiv Sena. A fearful family man, Gustad had always tried to remain free from controversies. He was never vocal about the demands of minority people, but his anxiety was always there. He choose to be safe when fanatics were concerned. He remembered how a peaceful rally to be violent.

Rohinton Mistry has given an elaborate description of the rituals, which are observed after the demise of a Parsi man. Gustad attended the dead body of Dinshawji on the way to the tower of silence and remind in the prayer bungalows until the function was over. He also attended the funeral ceremony of Bilimoria. Through Gustad’s participation in rituals and his observations of

prayers, Mistry has described the tit-bits of the Parsi culture in the novel. The dead body is taken to the prayer bungalows in a special van known as HEARSE. Before the prayer starts, the dead body has to be cleansed in the traditional method, which is known as *Suchaakar* and ablutions. After cleansing the body, it is covered with white cloth and laid on the marble platform. The priest first lights a lamp and then holds a silver sandalwood, dipped in oil, to the flame. Then the priest starts prayer. As Gustad observed that everything proceeded efficiently, he was astonished at the routine work. "It was as if Dinshawji died every day." The soft prayer was soothing.

The prayers filled the dark room slowly. Slowly the prayer sound was the dark room. In addition, before he was aware of it, Gustad was under its gentle spell. He forgot the time... he listened to the music, the song in a language, which he did not understand, but the words of this dead language, comprehending not one of them while mouthing his prayers. However, tonight in the dustoorji's soft and gentle music, the words were alive; tonight he came closer than he ever had to understanding the ancient meanings.

The description quoted above is not just a record of Parsi ritual, but a revelation of a spiritual experience gained through the music of an ancient language that has an enchanting power over the soul. Mistry makes an elaborate discussion on the topic in the form of a debate raging between reformists and the orthodox while describing the funeral of major Bilmoria. There are complaints against the Parsi practice of using vultures for eating up dead bodies. It is said that pieces of human flesh left by vultures fall on the balconies and roofs of buildings and cause nuisance. According to this Mistry presents a discussion among the Parsis. The bereaved insisted that the Panchayat do something about it. They said that the vultures should be properly trained. On the other hand, more vultures should be brought for consuming the entire flesh inside the well. In addition, Mistry did not project his own views on the issue. He only offered a realistic picture of the Parsi community, of the conflicts and differences among the Parsis funeral process. Moreover, Mistry did not project his own views on the issue. He only offered a realistic picture of the Parsi community, of the conflicts and differences among the Parsis funeral process.

Conclusion: Through the novel *Such a Long Journey*, Mistry Centralizes the Parsi community. In this novel the Parsi enclave 'khodadad Building' emerges as the background and all the residents of the buildings are Parsis whose presence beneath the narrative structure of the novel is strongly felt. Their way of life, distinct from Majority, their anguish at the changing pattern of communal

relationship and their nostalgia for the good old days are exhibited in such a way that they emerge as Parsis on personal level and as human beings of flesh and blood on a broader level. Graphic description of a certain customs and rituals related to the Parsi community happily merges with the Indian sensibility expressed in the novel. Thus, this novel is explaining about the Indian life including Indian politics is Parsi novel as well as an Indian novel representing the difficulties in the life of an average Indian.

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