

REPRESENTATION OF PARSİ CULTURE AND HISTORY IN ROHINTON MISTRY'S SELECT NOVELS

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Abstract:

In Such a Long Journey, Family Matters, Rohinton Mistry explores the evolution of post-colonialism in India as well as the existence of the Parsi community. It is described the way of life of Parsis. Despite Rohinton Mistry's unusual individualism, he is surrounded by a vast network of Parsi Indians, and his development as a person is the product of both conscious and unconscious responses to the Parsi culture. The novel Such a Long Journey, brought him international fame on wider perspectives. The present research paper is attempted to study the cultural elements that are close to Parsis, as a member of a racial minority, Rohinton Mistry's work strive to put forward the lives, beliefs, culture and practices of his community, whose members are now limited to a few. In terms of preserving its ethnicity and culture in the face of brutal modernity, the Parsee community is unmatched. This race is regarded as one of the purest among the group because there are relatively few inter-caste marriage links. Recent genetic research has demonstrated that their lineage's purity has been preserved. Their racial similarity to early humans shows that cultures can endure over time and distance. As a result, the cultural archetypes that are passed down the generations through the collective unconscious necessarily manifest in the literature from this society. In a way, the preservation of these cultural archetypes is an evident outcome of cultural preservation. And this will serve as the focus of the current study.

Keywords: Culture, community, society, race, Parsi, generation, history.

The word culture has many different meanings and it refers to an appreciation of good literature, music, art, food and also culture is the full range of learned human behaviour patterns. Generally diasporic literature is concerned with two aspects: one with the motherland which gives rise to nostalgia, memories and reminiscence, and the other, the new relationship with the migrated country and its people which gives rise to conflicts and split personalities. The alienation, loneliness, rootlessness, exile, cultural conflicts and at times of a sense of rejection by the host country are always common in diaspora. The cultural baggage that they carry is characteristic of the region that they come from and their descriptions of their homeland differ in every way. Jhumpa Lahiri describes that the vermilion (sindoor) applied in the parting of hair in a way that no other non-Bengali writer can. Similarly, Rohinton Mistry describes Parsi habits and customs is unique to him.

Another quality that characterizes the Indian diasporic writers is the way in which they cope with new community or country. If the person is first-generation migrant, s/he is obsessed with the home left behind and haunted by a feeling of rootlessness and alienation. A second-generation migrant would find coping far easier. However, they too face rejection and experience alienation as they can never become part of the white society like the white-skinned people who have migrated from countries such as Germany, Russia, Poland etc. According to Robert Stead, a Canadian poet, "Canada is like a big melting pot where all

the races are churned, and emerge 'Canadian' except "the yellow and the brown" (Varma 179). Such children grow up with their minds pulled in different directions by the different cultural values the ones at home which they are expected to adhere to and the different values that prevail outside and which they are expected to follow as well-assimilated citizens. This leads to a feeling of a loss of identity, of not belonging and insecurity. Hence, their psyches and sensibilities are divided between two worlds, and at best, they emerge with a "hyphenated identity" (179).

When the British colonized India, the Parsis aligned themselves with this Western power and influence. They believed that this identification would make them accepted as part of the Western ruling group. This was probably a response to their frustration at being considered and treated as outsiders by both Hindu and Muslim regimes. However, this was not true of all Parsis. Evidently stalwart nationalists such as Dadabhai Nauroji, Dinshaw Wacha and Ferozeshah Mehta proved to be contrary. An ambivalent attitude is part of the Parsi character that has already gone through the process of emigration and subsequent exposure to the various cultural influences in India. This has imparted a heterogeneous quality to Parsi existence in India and has bound them in an "ambience of nationalism" (Gera 147). The Parsis are intimately connected with the history of Bombay. The cotton boom was largely successful because of Parsi entrepreneurs. The oldest newspaper in Bombay, 'Bombay Samachar', was run by Parsis. One of India's biggest industrial houses was founded by a Parsi, Jamshedji Tata. Many of Bombay's causeways, roads and buildings were built by members of the Jeejeebhoy and Readymoney families.

The Parsi Gujarati writer of Indian origin, Rohinton Mistry migrated to the West (Canada) in 1975 at the age of 23. He worked as a clerk at the Imperial Bank of Commerce in Canada after moving there with his wife. "Mindless, clerical work," says Mistry about his stint at the bank. To overcome this dreariness, he joined the University of Toronto to study English and Philosophy part-time. His first short story "One Sunday" won the Hart House literary award. The following year he won it again for another short story "Auspicious Occasion". His first novel *Such a Long Journey* established him as a writer of repute.

However, his writings return to India time and again for themes and subject matter. As a writer in a new country and in a different social and cultural milieu, he faces many challenges. He has to make sense of the various spaces he occupies as a Parsi, Indian and Canadian. In doing so, several questions arise about where he belongs; what is his identity and ethnicity; what does it mean to belong to a nation and how to deal with multiculturalism within a framework of a nation state? In an interview with Nermeen Shaikh of Asia Source in 2002, Mistry states:

I felt very comfortable with the books and music [of the West] but actually living in the West made the same music seem much less relevant. It suddenly brought home to me very clearly the fact that I was imitating something that was not mine, that made no sense in terms of my own life, my own reality.

(http://www.asiasource.org/news/special_reports/mistry.cfm)

He grew up in a Parsi household in Bombay (now Mumbai) and this is what he knows best:

When you have grown up in one place and spent the first 23 years of your life there - that's how old I was when I left - it is almost as though you are never going to be removed from that place. Twenty-three years in the place where you were born, where you spent all your days with great satisfaction and fulfillment - that place never leaves you. All you have to do is keep updating it a little bit at a time. And it works. (ibid)

The novel *Family Matters* catches the spirit of the diaspora in the feeling of rootlessness, helplessness and alienation felt by the Parsi community at Khodadad Building in general and Gustad Noble in particular. The Parsis had to undergo economic losses, lowered social status and personal suffering when the government decided to nationalize banks. Though this move was welcomed by the rest

of the nation, the Parsi community became mere employees instead of masters in the banking sector. Nationalization symbolized nationhood, but it was a death blow to the Parsi way of life. Dinshawji comments: 'Parsis were the Kings of banking in those days. Such a respect we used to get. Now the whole atmosphere only has been spoiled. Ever since that Indira nationalized the bank'. (38)

The new nation state formed after independence is celebrated. However, the story of Major Bilimoria, Ghulam Mohammed, the war with Pakistan over what is now Bangladesh is pitted against the media hype of nationalism and patriotism over the war, the equating of Mother India with Mother Indira and the corruption existing in high places. The suppressed histories of ordinary people, some of whom (like Major Bilimoria and Ghulam Mohammed), are used by the state for its own vested interest serve to unseat the major history of a unified nation state. The question that Mistry seems to be asking is 'Is this a new kind of colonialism?'

In this context, Bombay appears to embody the space that favors a 'unified heterogeneity'. However, it is a mix of different communities wherein the smaller counter histories of individuals and ethnic groups interrupt and challenge the concept of a unified community living amicably. The Shiv Sena's insistence on ethnic parochialism makes nonsense of the pretty picture of tolerant and unified heterogeneity in a city or state, leave alone a nation. Gustad Noble's comment is relevant even today:

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. (55)

Mistry wanted to define an ideal space in the city of cosmopolitan Bombay. But the rendering of this idea acquires a life of its own and reveals intolerant groups of people who have problems in sharing space. On the other hand, the novel also shows the city as a place which holds oppositional spaces like the Parsi community and its Tower of Silence as well as the church of Mount Mary where Malcolm takes Gustad. There are other spaces where people belonging to different communities meet without clashing and in a friendly ambience. These spaces are Peerbhoy Paanwalla's shop, Gustad's office, the House of Cages, Flora fountain, Crawford market etc. At the end of the novel people of all communities come together in a morcha or show of protest against the Municipality. This notion of a heterogeneous community can be seen as an ideal one in the face of a 'unified nation state' concept forced upon the people by the government.

Mistry seeks to explore in his stories and novels, the relationships forged between family members, friends and others. These relationships form the heart and emotional core of any community, as well as highlight the cultural identity and the uniqueness of community living.

The significant aspect in *Such a Long Journey* is the metaphor of journey. In fact, journey is a central and most favored motif in diasporic writing. The title *Such a Long Journey* proclaims this motif and is reinforced by the three epigraphs that preface the novel. The first is from Firdausi's Shah Nama, which hints at the glorious past of the Iranian empire and the present downgraded state of Parsis. The second epigraph is from T. S. Eliot's poem, "The Journey of the Magi", which recalls the belief that the three magi or wise men who travelled far to witness the birth of Christ were Zoroastrian priests. It also gives a sense of a journey that has not ended. A sense of dejection is also implied in the title which is offset by the promise of the end of this long journey and the 8 hoped-for new order. The third epigraph which is taken from Tagore's Gitanjali suggests how some Parsis have moved away to new lands and have had to adapt themselves to new realities. This is the story of the Parsi diaspora. However, this epigraph is more hopeful and looks towards a new order:

And when old words die out on the tongue, new
melodies break forth from the heart.

As a Parsi and a writer, Mistry is caught in a double bind as a Parsi he is positioned on the margins of society and as an immigrant to Canada. This “in-betweenness” helps him to write about the complexities of everyday living of such a community and depict their insecurities. He is, therefore, the quintessential outsider. In India, his Parsi origins make him an outsider to the dominant majority community. Living in Canada, he is an outsider to India as well as to his adopted country. In this way, he is eminently suited to speak from a marginalized position, a place or space which privileges him with a “triple” vision. His is a “diasporic” imagination and his work is guided by his experience of 'double' displacement and 'triple' vision. The novel portrays Indian culture and family life against the backdrop of the country's volatile postcolonial politics.

The extent of the intrusion and effect of public and political events in the lives of ordinary individuals is convincingly portrayed through the troubled life of Gustad Noble and his family. The story expertly shows to which degree political and personal realities are intertwined and how much the microcosm echoes the macrocosm (the nation), since the lives of the characters are deeply affected by local corruption and the government's inadequacy. The unstable state of affairs be it politics, relationships, or the boundaries of a country is reflected in the constant breaking down of walls of different kinds. The wall enclosing Khodadad Building is demolished, the political boundaries of Pakistan are redrawn as had been done in the Indo-China war, the definition of nationalism is written afresh and the mental walls that Gustad erected in his mind are also brought down like the black people covering the windows. In this way, the novel is a mixture of the characters' private lives with public history.

Thus, *Such a Long Journey* educates the reader on the political conditions at a certain point in India's history. The revealing descriptions and deft character sketches of everyday Indian life found in *Tales from Firozsha Baag* are present in this novel. Mistry mixes historical facts with common perceptions of the days of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, giving the reader knowledge of the political corruption and its effect on the common citizen.

Mistry's fiction is rooted in the streets of Bombay, the city he left behind for Canada at the age of twenty-three. This is the writer's 'imaginary homeland' and Mistry has been compared with the latter, another Bombay born author now based abroad. However, there are differences as well as similarities between the two. While Rushdie's novel speaks of the Muslim middle classes, Mistry is comfortable and on sure ground among the Parsi community of Bombay. Rushdie's magic realism is replaced with Mistry's realism. Beyond such differences however, both novels have a tendency to collapse the distinctions between public and private worlds. Both share a sharp wit. Both writers have tasted success and garnered critical respect.

Mistry writes in a realistic mode which is almost Dickensian in its technique. In fact, Guy Lawson writes that “Mistry and Dickens are interested in those to whom history happens, those with little control over their circumstances” (qtd. in Kapadia & Khan 78). He has also been compared to R.K. Narayan and Salman Rushdie. His close attention to ordinary details captures the illusion of reality. The story of Gustad and the process of his disillusionment and hardships could have resulted in a sentimental, mawkish novel. But Mistry uses ironic humour and “a rare economy of image and symbol” (Singh 215) to write a novel which has “tough-minded realism” as its core. With the help of this technique, Mistry is able to reflect and portray the social ills of different communities and the corruption in high places. He draws upon different culture-specific narrative styles to tell his tale of the Parsi community. His use of the western tradition of realism is intermixed with the eastern oral tradition of storytelling in the way *Arabian Nights* is written. His narration and handling of characters is like the Indian “sutradhaar” who controls the characters, manipulates the action and leads the spectator/reader through the story.

At the centre of *Such a Long Journey*, Mistry has described Parsi community's religious rituals, especially those of death and burial. They are presented from the highly emotional perspective of the

otherwise 'rational' Gustad, as he buries Dinshawji and Billimoria and later Tehmul-lungraa. Mistry, as a Parsi writer, chooses to tackle religion and rituals in the context of the changes forced upon the community. Here Mistry also addresses the question of the adaptation of the Parsi rituals to contemporary life through the funeral and the debate about disposal of the body. Mistry presents three different approaches in his portrayal of the three funerals.

In short, *Family Matters* is concerned with these causes and how one interprets for connections between past and present. Characteristically, the novel centres on the difficulties of making sense of narrative with controlling time and change. Finally, this myth supports the basic Zoroastrian belief of the eternal battle between good and evil that rages within the soul of all men. Thus, it is important for human beings to remember their origins through such devices. Shattered dreams of immigration also trouble the pages of *Family Matters*.

The immigration story used to have two parts: dream and reality. But over the years the dream-of prosperity, house, car, CD player, computer, clean air, snow, lakes, mountains, abundance-had been renounced, since it was not going to come true (FM, 240).

To conclude, in *Such a Long Journey*, Rohinton Mistry comes out as a critical realist so far as the treatment of social reality is concerned. Through this method his ideology comes out to project the kind of society (Parsi) he wants to be a part of. Through this novel Mistry emerges as a progressive writer in his consciousness of the social and political aspects of a particular historical period.

Rohinton Mistry conveys his message for shunning exploitation of people to the world through his novels. He doesn't stop with attacking the social evils in their respective society. Mistry also conveys better solution to those social inequalities and evils through his works. His novels made some tremendous changes in their respective society. It enables the readers to respect the feeling of other man as they do to their own. It will pave way for the peaceful life on the earth. By affirming his faith in humanity, Mistry has successfully demonstrated that "hope springs eternal in the human heart". Everyone must feel that the human beings are all equal, liberal, and belong to one fraternity.

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