

ETHNICITY IN ROHINTON MISTRY'S WORKS: A POST-MODERN PERSPECTIVE

Anjan Das, Assistant Professor in English, B. N. Mahavidyalaya, Itachuna, Hooghly, West Bengal

Abstract: *This paper is prepared to explore the 'ethnicity' in Mistry's major works, which get huge success in postmodern scenario. The term 'ethnicity', which is related with socio-cultural tradition of a community in the context of another major community, is profoundly discussed from the characterization and the events presented in the novels. The Parsi community, which has a 'hoary past' but declining populace, is undoubtedly a disclaimer of preserving their own ethnic identity not only in southern Asian countries, but also across the world. Being a Parsi-diaspora, Mistry's fictional sensitivity encompasses not only the Parsi ethnicity alone, but even all others who serve a live co-existence since Pre-Independence era to the present time. Mistry's works of monumental repute make a concerted attempt to analyse and validate the ethnic dimensions in multifarious contexts of Indian society, keeping in mind the post modern perspectives.*

Key Words: *Ethnicity, postmodern, socio-cultural tradition, hoary past, ethnic identity.*

Introduction

Postmodernism witnesses infinity of enlightenment in all spheres of life. Since the end of colonial era, a colonized nation feels free to celebrate her liberty with heart's content no bound. An "Eternal Spirit of the chainless Mind" (Byron, 1) penetrates the sensitivity of all suffered long under the tyranny of the colonizers. What the modernist Matthew Arnold experiences the low ebb of 'Sea of Faith' in humanity, the postmodernists like T. S. Eliot take further step to feel 'death-in-life' existence all around the Western world, Samuel Beckett basically identifies the 'absurdity' in human life, and what the French author Eugene Ionesco puts forward, is worth mentioning here:

Cut off from his religious, metaphysical and transcendental roots, man is lost;
all his actions become senseless, absurd, useless. (Martin Esslin,23)

In realm of Indian literature in English, the visualization of A. K. Ramanujan making a stark contrast between the ancient and new poets in act of eulogy of the emblematic river, is a fine instance of postmodern outburst, Equally is the voice of Salman Rushdie, who provides his kaleidoscope envision of 'magic realism' in *Midnight's Children* to show the fine blending of fantasy and mundane reality in fictional narrative. With its chief dictum '*cogito, ergo sum*' ("I think, therefore I am", Rene Descartes), the postmodern approach, in fact, welcomes the subjectivism as an undercurrent ideology, wherein supremely reigns the concepts of identity and ethnicity as paramount parameters of socio-cultural life in a society. Indeed, ethnic identity, which specifies one's socio-cultural recognition in a certain time and space, is a hallmark of any community, either in multi-communal India, or across the country. Parsi Community is no exception of it, wherein the much acclaimed novelist Rohinton Mistry, along with his major works dubbed in maximum post modern formulations of colonial hangover, hybridism, socio-cultural pastiches, economic disparity, freelance spirit etc. reigns supreme.

Ethnicity in Rohinton Mistry's Novels

As a postcolonial imprint, everything English culture became one and all for Parsi ethnicity. English education, English dress code, English social courtesies and etiquette---all of these caused a huge

impact on Parsi people in general and on Mistry in particular. It is known to all that Mistry was born in the context just after a few years of Independence happened in Indian history, specifically in the year 1952. Even then things English in all its paraphernalia nourished profound influence on him. Added to it was his upbringing during the milieu, when Indo English literature started a fresh flourish in the welkin of world literature with postmodern names like V. S. Naipaul, Salman Rushdie, Vikram Sheth, and many others. Mistry under the sway of such great stalwarts exalted himself in literary arena successfully.

It has been centuries long that the Parsi has been settled in India, and the gradual declining of the community has made them minority undoubtedly. But their success rate in different fields of the society has led them to the path of competency in comparison to the mainstream Hindu community in India. The Indian Freedom Movement is supposed to be accelerated by the iconic figures like Dadabhai Naoroji and Sir Pherozeshah Mehta. Yet it is said that a majority of the Parsees distanced themselves from the common Indians on account of their better economic and educational status. Mistry, however, gives access for the ordinary Parsee characters in his fictional world to depict a miniature India as far as practicable.

Tales from Firozsha Baag

Ethnicity of Parsi community and also of other minorities always remains under the broad purview of Rohinton Mistry while exploring his fictional discourses. For a comprehensive understanding, our research regarding the best ethnic practices should be kept in focus on some pieces of his stories first, and then the major fictional works be proceeded. His first published collection of stories entitled *Tales from Firozsha Baag* keep focus on the cultural identity and challenges of faith as experienced by the inhabitants of the cosmopolitan Firozsha Baag. Of its eleven stories, our focus, on account of compact discourse, will be on the most important narrative in the collection. 'Auspicious Occasion' is the first story coming at first. It is a fine tale which abounds in lots of Parsi elements, manifested deftly through the main characters of Rustomji and Mehroo. Mistry characterizes Rustomji as an eccentric and bloody minded 'Bawaji' and his wife Mehroo as a pious woman, observed ritualistic in *Agiary* or the Fire of Temple. With the day break, Mehroo reaches the temple, while her husband Rustomji goes out late and faces an incident at the bus stop, where some stranger spits *paan* from running bus to spoil Rustomji's *dugli*. At the initial reaction, Rustomji bursts out in fury and abuses the people, who, instead of protestation, laugh at him only. In fact, Rustomji is physically assaulted by the '*ghaat*' (the Indian general public), who make others butt of mockery better than causing actual protestation in public.

Such A Long Journey

Prominence of ethnicity develops with the gradual publications of Mistry's voluminous works of fiction by the last decades of twentieth century. His concern for the community that has 'a hoary past' gets exposed in his first novel *Such a Long Journey* published 1991. With the exposition of *Such a Long Journey*, Gustad Noble, a Parsi gentleman, aged fifty years old, is the central character in the novel. His family members consist of his wife, Dilnawaz, his two sons Sohrab and Darius, and nine years old daughter, Roshan. Gustad shares his friendly relation with Major Jimmy Bilimoria, Dinshawji and Tehmul Lungraa. He is a devoted banking clerk by profession and true to his name 'Noble'. Physically he is 'tall', 'solid', 'broad-shouldered', and serves as a 'very loyal' to his friends. His honesty hardly hurts anybody. A best sum-up on his characterization is made by the critic Narendra Kumar, when he says that Gustad "is a pious Parsee whose life is governed by *humata* (good thoughts), *hukhta* (good words) and *hvarshata* (good deeds). His charitable act for the three destitute children his prayer for others at the church Mt. Mary are concrete illustrations of his probity and rectitude. Such little acts of kindness govern the best portion of his life" (Parsee Novel, p-83).

A Fine Balance

In Mistry's second novel *A Fine Balance*, the four major characters---Dina Dalal, Maneck Kohlah, Omprakash and Ishwar---undergo a life of insecurity and rootlessness. Dina, born and brought up in

Bombay, is a character of dreams, losing father at an early age, becoming widow just after three years of her marriage, refusing to be a burden over her brother's family, and preferring to live independent by the profession of tailoring. Maneck, a young man from the hills, is the only child in the family, and unwillingly departs his family in pursuit of higher education in Bombay, having a shelter in Dina's apartment. Ishwar and Omprakash, belonging to Dalit minority, face a long journey of hazards, and ultimately arrive in Bombay to work under the tailor-mistress Dina Dalal. All these four characters become a nucleus to struggle for life and weave a fine tale of ethnic identity till the end. The Parsi ethnicity in form of humanity comes out in the character of Maneck when he decides to take part in the funeral procession of Shankarm a beggar by profession, who was better regarded as the 'worm' in the novel. When Dina failed to persuade him to stay out of it, she too gave him company --- to be a part of the cremation rites of a beggar, who was also a fine human being like all others. Such ethical feelings of community for community's sake add a wonderful flavour to the novel.

Family Matters

Height of ethnicity gets highly discernible in Mistry's third work of fiction, *Family Matters*, published in 2002. Here the Parsi culture in Bombay is again the chief focus of the author. Mistry's literary interest lies here in the trials and tribulations of a middle-class Parsi family during the mid-1990s. The very plot of the novel highlights the Parsi- Indian ethnicity in terms of family bonding, which is quite mismatched with the Western family setup. The prime plot mover is Nariman Vakeel, the 79 year old Patriarch, a widower, suffering from Parkinson's disease. When the novel unfolds itself, it is seen that Nariman lives with his step children, Coomy and Jal in his flat house in Chateau Felicity, a Parsi locale. When Nariman faces the accident of ankle-break, he is pushed into a complete bed rest for a long time, and at that time, Jal and Coomy strategically shift the task of caring for the ailing Nariman to Roxana, their half-sister, living with her husband Yezad, her two sons Murad and Jehangir at the Pleasant Villa. Such kind of family dependence of old Nariman on their younger family members might seem unusual and unethical to the Westerners, but quite a commonality in India, where unmarried adult children are allowed to dwell happily with their elderly family members.

Marriage is truly one of the major family matters in Mistry's eponymous novel *Family Matters*. This issue comes into notice on the occasion of Nariman's seventy-ninth birthday celebration, just after the participation of Roxana along with Yezad, and her two sons Murad and Jehangir. Throughout the day, Nariman remains engrossed with the flashbacks of his first ladylove Lucy Braganza, reminisces his memories of love and friendship passed intimately with her, and particularly that "Sunday evening", when he gets refused of his marriage proposal by his parents for their inter-religiosity. Coomy, who is used to such occasional lapses of their father's mind, blames him for all the unhappiness and implausibilities, and frenziedly blurts out the name of Lucy Braganza, which in no time catches the attention of Murad and Jehangir, who on their way back question their parents of grandpa's issue clandestine to them. Getting no way to eschew, Roxana unwillingly explains, "Grandpa had wanted to marry Lucy, but couldn't because she was not a Parsi. So he married uncle and Aunt's mother... He asked if there was a law against marrying someone who wasn't a Parsi. His father said yes, the law of bigotry..." (*FM*, p.42) The Epilogue of the novel is replete with various other customs of the Parsi community, particularly Murad's birthday ceremony celebrated twice as per English and Parsi calendars.

Conclusion

As a Parsi minority in one hand and Diaspora on the other, Mistry depicts the Parsi ethnicity in his major works *par excellence*. His works, be it *Tales from Firozsha Baag* or the novel like *Such Long A Journey*, are a treasure-trove of Parsi ethnicity not only in postmodern perspective but even all ages to come. Distance from his native country has not made him a rootless as happened to others. He has been a phenomenal success; his approach is quite constructive and proceeds with his unflinching conviction. In

spite of living abroad, his urge for Parsi ethnicity has made him remain Indian, cultivate Indian culture and write profusely on India and Indians. Unlike the other Indo English writer like Bharati Mukherjee, who says in *The Telegraph* in 1989, "America is more real to me than India", Mistry writes about everything Indian; he maintains Indian ethnicity strongly, albeit residing in Canadian, with his unique logic, "If you have a cupboard with a certain amount of space in it, then you have to arrange your belongings in that cupboard the best way you can, given the space. But if you buy a new cupboard you have more space. (Mishra, P-61)

Works Cited

1. Bharucha, Nilufer E, (1995). "*When Old Tracks are Lost*": Rohinton Mistry's Fiction as Diasporic Discourse. *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 302.
2. Esslin, Martin. *The Theatre of the Absurd*, London: Penguin Books, 1986, 23. Print.
3. Kapoor, Aditi, "The Parsis: *Fire on Ice*", Times of India, 14 May, 1989.
4. Mishra, Cahru C, "Two Cupboards": Transcultural Discourse in Rohinton Mistry's Short Stories": *The Commonwealth review*. Vol.12, No.2, 2000-2001 .p-61. Print
5. Mistry, Rohinton, *A Fine Balance*, New Dekhi, Rupa, 1996. Print
6. _____, *Such A Long Journey*, Great Britain: Faber and Faber, 2001. Print
7. _____, *Tales from Firozsha Baag*, London: Faber and Faber, 2002. Print
8. _____, *Family Matters*, London: Faber and Faber, 2002. Print
9. Singh, A. K. "*The Sense of Community in the Parsi Novels*", *The Literary Criterion*, Vol.32, No.3, 1996.