

ALONG THE PERIPHERY: A CLOSE READING ON THE NUGATORY EXISTENCE OF PARSIS AS REFLECTED IN MISTRY' S SUCH A LONG JOURNEY

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Even though Zoroastrianism is the oldest monotheistic religion and hence the Parsis can claim of being the world' s oldest religious belief, their numbers are diminishing at a fast pace. Despite being an infinitesimally miniscule community, they have exercised much impact on the Indian peninsula. The centuries old stay in India has not prompted them to think of themselves as Indians and they still consider Pars to be their homeland. The Parsis experience lot of anxieties and concerns being a small ethnic minority in a multicultural country like India. Mistry being an insider is very much concerned about the difficult situation his community is trapped in and delineates the hardships and misfortunes of his ethnic group in the background of postcolonial culture. The novel has Bombay as its setting, the city where he was born and bred and the saga of the community is sketched in the background of Indo-Pak war and the formation of Bangladesh.

Mistry in the novel exposes the deplorable state of his community. Besides the insecurity and identity issues are other complications like falling population, marriages at a later age, ascending divorce rate, alienation etc. These burning issues are meticulously portrayed in the novel *Such a Long Journey*. The feeling of insecurity and apprehensions of being stifled by the mainstream Hindu community, induces the Parsis to cling on to their religious customs and conventions which is replicated in *Such a Long Journey*.

There is an innermost impulse to reinstate the Imaginary homeland, or at least to conserve it in his psyche and narrative. As Salman Rushdie says:

Exiles or immigrants or expatriates are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back, even at the risk of being mutated in the pillars of salt. But if we do look back, we must also do so in the knowledge-that our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind. (428)

Rohinton Mistry in his fiction tries to modify the chronicle of his homeland and outlines his ethnic identity and sense of self. The tale is set in seventies and the historical happenings and social circumstances are represented through the viewpoint of Parsi community. The central character is Gustad Noble, who as the name implies, is a pious Parsi. He signifies the archetypal potentials of a Zoroastrian, like compassion and munificence. He is very concerned about his son Sohrab' s IIT admission. He is nostalgic about his family' s golden days. His grandfather was an affluent furniture seller and his father owned a book store. Gustad struggles to keep both ends meet. He is shocked to find that his son has no plans to join IIT and wants to join arts college along with his friends. He yells at his son: "Friends? Friends? Don' t talk to me of friends !If you have good reasons, I will listen .But don' t say friends! You must be blind if you cannot see my own example and learn from it" (48-49). The unexpected desertion of his beloved friend Jimmy Billimoria makes him feel so offended.

Gustad is concerned over political corruption and the outcome of it on the ordinary man. He is cynical of Indira Gandhi and Shiv Sena. He thinks that Parsis are unsafe in Bombay and wishes to return to Iran, the Parsis' homeland, even though it is practically impossible. Remarking on the dilemma of Parsis in Bombay, he says: " No future for minorities, with all these fascist Shivsena 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).

Dinshawji is mainly uneasy over the alteration of place names which he wants to associate to the dislodgment of Parsi community in India. When Gustad comments what is in a name Dinshawji counters:

Names are so important. I grew upon Lamington road. But it has disappeared, in its place is Dadasaheb Bhadmakar Marg. My school was on Carnac road. Now suddenly

it is on Lokmanya Tilak Marg. I live at Sleater road, Soon that will also disappear. My whole life I have come to work at Flora Fountain. And one fine day the name changes, so what happens to the life I have lived? Was I living the wrong life, with all the wrong names, Will I get a second chance to live it all again, with these new names? Tell me what happens to my life. Rubbed out, just like that? (74)

The old generation complies firmly to the old-style way of life, but the younger people keep at bay from religion. From his childhood, Gustad has been taught to follow the principles of Zoroastrianism. Even though he goes to church along with his Christian friend, he continues to be a fervent Zoroastrian as he thinks “religions were not like garment styles that could be changed at whim or to follow fashion” (24).

Political corruption during Indira Gandhi's regime too finds a place in the novel. Jimmy Billimoria who gets arrested for mimicking the prime minister's voice is the illusory foil of Sohrab Nagarwalla, a Parsi who was arrested for imitating Indira Gandhi's voice and misuse of funds. Parsis are renowned for their truthfulness and were wounded when a representative of their community was arrested on charge of fraudulent transactions. Mistry expresses the fury of his community in the novel.

Assuming that Mr. Billimoria has the talent of voice impersonation, is it routine for our national banks to hand over vast sums of money if the prime minister telephones? How high up does one have to be in the government or the Congress party to be able to make such a call? And was the chief cashier so familiar with Mrs. Gandhi's voice that he accepted the instructions without any verification whatsoever? If yes, does that mean that Mrs. Gandhi has done this sort of thing frequently? (195)

The Parsis possessed a superior status during British rule. Their light skin, uprightness and resourceful nature endeared them to the British masters. When the British left India, the Parsis felt apprehensive and dreaded that they will be submerged in the majority Hindu community. Many of the Parsis were bankers and when Indira determined to nationalise the banks, many of them became penniless. The younger generation drifted to the west in search of greener pastures. Dinshawji says to Gustad:

“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 nationalised the banks” (20). The Parsis have a bitterness towards Indira as they feel that Feroze Gandhi was not treated fairly. They suspect that his was not a natural death.

Because of the feeling of insecurity, the Parsis cling to their customs. The readers are acquainted with Parsi funeral rites. Since they insist on purity, the Parsis believe that earth, fire, air and water should not be polluted. The dead bodies are brought to the Tower of Silence where they are given to birds of prey. The older generation adheres to this system of body disposal. Mistry reveals the difference of opinion within the community regarding funeral. The younger generation supports cremation. S. Krishnapriya & Lt. Dr. M. S. Zakir Hussain remarks in *Theme of Politics and Problematic Representation of Parsis in Rohinton Mistry's Select Novels*, “The novel undoubtedly reconnoitres the socio-political issues which trouble the inhales of the characters and furthermore the anxieties about their future as minority individuals. Mistry has effectually entangled mechanisms of Parsi society and religion in his composition. It infers various classes, callings, station, and day by day lives of the normal Parsi individuals in a special manner” (418).

Gustad's journey is a metaphor for the voyage of an ethnic minority community which is on the verge of extermination. Mistry is able to represent the sense of loss, dislodgment and nostalgia which is a typical characteristic of an immigrant. There is always an inner impulse to return to their native land even though it is unfeasible. The author voices the pangs of the microscopic community and exposes his diasporic consciousness.

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