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Parsis at the cultural crossroads: A study of Rohinton Mistry's oeuvre

Rohinton Mistry is known for his realistic portrayal of the Parsi life. His characters represent a community, whose identity is historically problematised, first because of the Parsis' exodus following Muslim invasion of ancient Persia leading to their settlement in the hospitable environs of Gujarat, though on condition of off-loading marginally their cultural baggage. During the British rule, they got alienated from the native people as they were supposed to be in cahoots with the master race. At this point, the Western lifestyle and mores permeated the eastern inheritance of the Parsis. Post-independence, they had to adjust with the same people whom a few generations of Parsis had once learnt to deride and despise. More than attitudinal changes, this created an identity crisis for them and they found themselves at the cultural cross-roads.

A large number of young Parsis chose to and still continue to migrate to the West – Mistry himself being one of them – hoping to recover a life of comfort and pride. But their western experience has reminded some of Mathew Arnold's famous lines: "Standing between two worlds, one dead/ The other powerless to be born." Rohinton Mistry's work selected for this paper include three novels viz. *Such a Long Journey*, *A Fine Balance* and *Family Matters*; and a collection of stories *Tales from Firozsha Baag* which deal with his mixed bag of experiences, in an idiom that has ensured classic status for his works. This paper seeks to analyze the inter-play of Eastern and Western influences in the life of the Parsis, as portrayed by Rohinton Mistry in his oeuvre. While dealing with the issue, we look at the concept of functioning of a cultural identity as acting along two planks – seeking to maintain a certain aloofness and simultaneously exploring avenues of adjustment with other cultures.

In order to contextualize the identity issue, the historical trajectory needs to be explored in detail here. The Parsis have had a glorious past. Theirs is one of the oldest civilizations on the earth. A unifying force that bound the people together was located in faith that they practised. The people of ancient Iran belonged to the Indo-European branch of the Aryans and their history goes as far back as 2000 B.C., "when Zarathushtra, the Prophet of ancient Iran is believed to have been born. The Parsis still follow his teachings"(Nanavutty 1). The Kayanian Dynasty ruled the Aryans of Iran till 700 B.C. The names of some of the kings of the period such as Kava Husravah, Kava Usa and Kava Vishtaspa form part of the Parsi history. It is said to be a heroic period of the Iranian history. Later, the Achaemenian dynasty expanded the state into a vast empire. Some of the great figures of the time are Cyrus the Great (559-530 B.C.) and Darius (522-486 B.C.) who is credited with having introduced banking, an activity in which the Parsis are still known to have a special expertise.

When Emperor Constantine embraced Christianity, war started between Iran and Rome. Later, within the country also strife became the order of the day for quite some period. Great figures of the time who have their names etched in the minds of the common Parsis are Shapur I, Khushrau I (called Nowshirwan-i-Adil, Nowshirwan the Just). Interaction with India started during this time. There is record of marriages between the princely families of the two nations as also interest in Indian music. In 614 A.D., Khushrau II, the Victorious attacked Jerusalem and captured it, killing 50000 Christians. This naturally enraged the entire Christian world. Counter attacks were waged by the Christian forces bringing much misery to the people. Thereafter started the decline of the Persian empire. After the death of Prophet Mohammad, the Arabs started a series of invasions on Iran and were successful in A.D. 641. The last king of the Persian empire Yazdegard was in hiding for ten years before being caught and assassinated. The followers of Zarthushtra had to flee, get converted or lie low. How the Parsis take pride in recalling their glorious past is very well shown by the words spoken on the Parsi wedding, in which the day and year is calculated from "Emperor Yazdegard of the Sassanian Dynasty of auspicious Iran....in according with the rites and rules of the Mazdayasnans" (Nanavutty 24).

The exodus to India started after a century or so. The documentary evidence speaks of a stream of migration from A.D. 785 to 1021. However, trade and cultural relations between India and the Persian empire existed since, at least, the third century A.D. According to *Kissa-i-Sanjan* scribed in Persian by Dastur Sanjana, the migrating Parsis were received by the king of a coastal region in Gujrat, Jadhav Rana, who gave them permission to settle down on certain conditions. These included explaining the Zoroastrian faith to the king, the adoption of Gujrati as their mother tongue and sari as the dress by their women, the surrender of all weapons and carrying out of Parsi wedding ceremonies only during night so as not to offend the local sensibilities. The Parsis agreed to these conditions. According to a Parsi folklore sung in the form of *garba* songs, the king received the migrants in the presence of all local citizens. The head of the Parsi group, a priest, asked for permission to worship freely, to bring up their young ones according to their traditions and land to cultivate. These conditions were agreed to by the king who asked what they would do for the country. Upon this, "the old priest asked for a brass bowl to be filled with milk and brought to the assembly. This done, he stirred a spoonful of sugar in the bowl and holding it up in his trembling hands, said, 'We shall try to be like this insignificant amount of sugar in the milk of your human kindness.'" (Nanavutty 40) The Parsis have faithfully kept their word since and looked upon India as their motherland.

Barring a few bloody clashes with some jealous native tribes, this East-East interface progressed well. Primarily, both Indians and Parsis belonged to the Indo-European branch of the Aryans. Their language and religious practices had a lot in common. Words like Usa, Kavi, Gaumata are from the ancient language of the Parsis. The favourite drink of the Aryans soma seems to have become hauma due to pronounciational problem just as the people of the Sindhu valley civilization were referred to as Hindus by the Arabs. Now, of course the Parsis speak Gujrati with a smattering of Persian words. Mistry has consciously used typical Parsi words without any change in his writing. The worship of fire and feeding it with sandalwood branches is quite similar to the Vedic *Yagya*. In fact, according to a school of thought, the idea of fire as a god was brought by the *Magis* from Persia. The marriage ceremony benedictions are recited in Sanskrit even now. The Gayatri mantra and the Trishtubh prayer

have a lot in common. The Parsi *Gathas* expound some obscure words of the Rig Veda on the basis of certain archaic grammatical forms. The *Kusti* which every Parsi must wear as a distinctive mark can be compared with the *Yagyopaveet* worn by Hindus. Both these items mark the first initiation ceremony of a child in the fold of his respective faith.

Mistry is not one of those crying from roof-tops about his community's glorious past. There are, however, brief references like the one in the form of the reaction of Kersi's father in the story 'Swimming Lessons' in *Tales from Feorzsha Baag* to his son's stories (Kersi seems to be Mistry's alter ego). He wishes that his son would write something positive about Parsis' glorious past and recounts the great figures of history (245). More than that, Mistry's novels as also stories are full of references to religious aspect of the Parsi life. He is, in fact, concerned about the alarming decline in the population of the Parsis and is said to have stated in an interview that "when the Parsis have disappeared from the face of the earth, his writing will 'preserve a record of how they lived'" (Bharucha 45). As such, the opening scene in *Such a Long Journey* begins with the chief character Gustad Noble offering the morning prayers with tying and untying of *kusti* and all that. In *Family Matters*, the procedure for normal daily fire worship in an *agiary* is mentioned in detail through Yezad's participation. His repetition of the Parsi prayer words "Manashni, Gavashni, Kunashni" meaning good thoughts, good words and good deeds reminds one of the *mansa vaacha karmanaa* discipline of *Karma Yoga*. Again, the celebration of the Behram roje, the Parsi new year is the theme of the story 'One Sunday' in *Tales from the Ferozsha Baag*. While *A Fine Balance* carries the details of Dina's wedding, the description of death rituals occur almost in each one of his works. While making these comparisons, allowance must be made for another Parsi intellectual giant Homi Bhabha's reservation about taking the equivalence of two different cultural experiences for granted. And yet there is hardly any other way to appropriate that experience, live as we do in differences.

During the British rule in India, the western influence cast its shadow on the Parsis, who, as businessmen, felt obliged to befriend the rulers. The proximity also spilled over to the political field. Some prominent Parsi merchants helped the British rulers but the British merely used them. Apart from the British, there were also the French, the Dutch and the Portuguese ruling the coastal areas. The Parsi entrepreneurs often acted as mediators between different parties. This also helped the Parsis secure government jobs. The Christian missionaries were greatly facilitated in their work by the ruling class at that time. With the rise of the national sentiment in India, the Hindus preferred not sending their children to educational institutions run by the Christian missionaries but the Parsis did not have any such scruples with the result that their children became more proficient in English than others. This does not mean that all was well between the Parsis and the Christians. In fact, there was a furore when two Parsi boys studying in Wilson College, Bombay were converted to Christianity. The continued proximity of the Parsis to the Englishmen also created a chasm between the Parsis and other communities in India even though there is a significant contribution made to the freedom struggle by certain towering Parsi figures like Ferozeshah Mehta, Dadabhai Naoroji, Dinshaw Wacha, Bhikaji Cama et al. They still continue to contribute to the national life in an impressive manner even though they form only 0.016% of the total population of India. Take any area – business, politics, social service, administration, professionals, armed forces, sports, science, arts, music, literature, journalism.....and you find the Parsis there.

The westernized lifestyle of the Parsis is a fact recognized by Mistry also. Whether it is the surfeit of English rhymes and song-lines in *Such a Long Journey*; the birthday celebrations in pucca English style, the handling of love-sick Lucy by a married Professor or the way of addressing his father-in-law as 'chief' in *Family Matters*, English culture seems to have permeated the Parsi lifestyle perfectly. Again, in *Tales from Firozsha Baag*, we see Tehmina hooked on to her evening scotch and soda and the Boyces keeping their weekly supply of beef in Najamai's refrigerator. All this surely shows the Parsis living in a world that is poles apart from the common Indian way of life. Whereas this has affected their estimation in the eyes of ordinary Indians, the politico-religious turmoil in the wake of Babri demolition episode has unnerved many Parsis also. Nilufer Bharucha aptly remarks: "In decolonized India, the exalted position enjoyed by the Paris during he Raj has been eroded and increasing dominance by the majority Hindu community has marginalized them. Parsis today are trying to reorient themselves to this new much reduced role." (Bharucha 42) To this heart-breaking new role can be added some other problems impinging upon their cultural identity.

Religion has been thus far a great unifying factor among the Parsis. They left the shores of ancient Persia for the sake of religion and have maintained their separate identity on that basis. But the modern Parsi youth, a product of western education and upbringing, is distancing himself from religion. In *A Fine Balance*, Maneck Kohlah, in utter desperation, calls God 'the Bloody Fool' and questions his judgement of fair and foul which, according to him, is as simple as reading the balance sheet. "He would have been sacked long ago if He were managing a corporation..."(585). In *Family Matters*, the child Jehangir asks in his innocence: "If only Dada Ormuzd could help me understand! Why mut prayer and religion lead to so many fights between father and son? Is that His will?" (466). Who would give answers to such questions? The education in the Parsi religion is not organized. At best, they have semi-literate *dustoor*s or priests. There is no facility like the Sunday church school or a visiting pastor. Religious debates are unheard of. This leaves a lot to be desired from the point of view of the young generation.

Population is an important factor in the visibility and viability of cultural identity. Over the years, there has been a drastic fall in the population of the Parsis. The total population of the Parsis in India stood at one lac in 1961, 90000 in 1971 census, 75-80000 in 1987 census (Haldar 102) and is estimated to be around 25000 at present which means an endangered community. No wonder that the Govt. of India has announced sops to bolster the Parsi population ("Jiyo Parsi"). A portal was also launched by the Minister for Minority Affairs, Mr. Kiran Rijuju on Aug. 13, 2024. In *Family Matters*, Dr. Fitter and Mr. Masalawala discuss the issue in a frank manner. In an age of cut-throat competition, economic prosperity takes precedence over family. Late marriages tell upon chances of sound proliferation. Jal and Coomy, the siblings in the *Family Matters*, have not married even though they are well past their marriageable age. In this, what comes as an eye-opener is the fact that lack of adequate housing facility in Parsi buildings and high rentals elsewhere in Bombay have also emerged as culprits. In the story 'Swimming Lessons', the persona refers to two major problems haunting the Parsis: "We are the chosen people where osteoporosis is concerned. And divorce. The Parsi community has the highest divorce rate in India. It also claims to be the most westernized community in India. Which is the result of the other? Confusion again of cause and effect." (230). With a high proportion of ageing, ailing Parsi population, the future in terms of numbers seems bleak.

While expecting the world around to change, their own house must be set in order by the Parsis. In the situation in which the community finds itself, organizations claiming to work in the interest of the community should have worked zealously to safeguard the cultural identity and to instil the awareness in the Parsi youth. But clearly, Mistry is not satisfied, therefore in his oeuvre, the work of the Parsi Panchayats and Trusts takes a well-deserved drubbing. Whereas Rustomji of 'Auspicious Occasions' (TFFB) loses his cool at the very mention of the Parsi trust because it has failed to maintain well the apartment block in which he stays with his wife. One big reason for the failure of the Parsi panchayats is reported to be their hereditary character. That is indeed an anachronism in our times. Moreover, the Panchayat is doing little to come to terms with the issue of falling population of the Parsis. Besides, promotion of Parsi culture and teaching of Zoroastrianism to the new generation are tasks which have to be undertaken urgently.

Another big factor that presents a hurdle to the Parsis acknowledging the Indian identity with pride is the Indian brand of politics. It is a fact that Mistry hates this political tomfoolery which is aimed at grabbing power by the vote bank politics at its best and by hook or crook at its worst. There is hardly any human element in it. This creates aversion and distrust in the minorities. Mistry has castigated the political leadership for the ills that befell the nation in the wake of proclamation of emergency. How this ill-advised step of the late Prime Minister Indira Gandhi affected the man in the street, has been graphically illustrated in *A Fine Balance*. Prior to it, the Nagarvala scandal during the Bangladesh liberation war proved to be Mrs. Gandhi's Achilles' heel. The plot of *Such a Long Journey* rested on it. In *Family Matters*, Mistry based the central action on the situation arising out of Shiv Sena agitation in Bombay. These eye-opening accounts of political bungling are a stumbling block in the way of the Parsis' healthy adjustment in Indian society at a time when other options like migrating to developed countries are available to them.

Times have truly changed. The youth of India, Parsis or others, aspire to be world citizens these days, thanks to their educational skills and expanding world markets. Due to the competition from other communities in India, the Parsis have migrated in large numbers to other countries like Canada, New Zealand, Australia etc. Those who cannot make it to the promised land –Canada, in the case of Yezad in *Family Matters*, retain a life-long scar in their psyche. Mistry has very vividly captured the mood of the Gen-next in the character of Jamshed in his story 'Lend me Your Light' (TFFB), who just cannot put up with things in Bombay and would be happy to catch the next flight back to New York. Again, it is not necessary that the westward immigration would be successful. Even if we leave out Sarosh's 'eastern bowels, western seat' problem with its fantastic medical solutions on account of high imagination, we cannot dismiss his observation that could be true of many exiles: "tell them that in Toronto once there lived a Parsi boy as best as he could. Set you down this; and say, besides, that for some it was good and for some it was bad, but for me life in the land of milk and honey was just a pain in the posterior." (TFFB 168)

The question of identity confusion is all the more severe in the case of a person living the life of an exile, for in his case again, it is the case of what Derrida would call 'double displacement' since to him, "the nation is rooted first of all in the memory of anxiety of a displaced – or displaceable – population. It is not only time that is out of joint, but space, space in time, spacing". (Bharucha 55). We can also say that the exile is haunted by the nostalgia of his homeland while he is hardly at home

in his adopted home. The other character in the story 'Lend me your light' -- Kersi is almost forced to go abroad by popular sentiment of the Parsi neighbourhood, it seems. His reflection is self-revealing: "I, Tiresias, blind and throbbing between two lives, the one in Bombay and the one to come in Toronto..." (180). Mistry has been careful enough to juxtapose him with his brother Percy who is an idealist and risks his life to work in the rural areas of India. There are others like Kersi, who aspire but fail to make the sacrifices needed to have his elder brother's sentiments. He merely prays, "Lend me your light", but the likes of Percy have shunned the ambivalence and acquired an identity, an authentic one at that.

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Dr. Jagdish Batra

Professor of English

OP Jindal Global University, Sonipat

Email: <drjagdishbatra@gmail.com>