

## The Agony of a Cultural Outsider: Rohinton Mistry's *Such a Long Journey*

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Ethnocentrism and the resultant penchant for giving voice to the marginality of the community are probably strong motifs in The Post-Independence Indian Parsi writing in English. Thus, their works can well be treated as instances of minority discourse in Indian literature. As a discourse from the margins of broad spectrum of Indian culture, Parsi fictional works in general and Rohinton Mistry's works in particular present the agony of a cultural outsider faced by Parsis in India. However, it is to be noted that the of socio-cultural milieu with which Mistry's Parsi characters are part of may not be the one existing right now, especially in the present scenario of globalization, but rather it is the one existed at certain important junctures in the history of the country that posed difficulties in the smooth survival of Parsis in Bombay. In fact, the agony of a cultural outsider as articulated by Gustard Noble and other Parsi heroes of Mistry emanate basically from a feeling of insecurity, and the fear of a possible merging with the dominant culture. Besides, the community as a whole is found to be disturbed by their declining population, late-marriages, urban-craze, high rate of divorce and so forth. The strange traits that the Parsi characters display in the works written by Parsi writers can also be approached as emblematic of what Dharan refers to as "ethnic atrophy syndrome" (7). Thus the community as such is the protagonist in most of the Parsi writings.

Minority discourses in general, by specifically representing the pangs of growth that a community undergoes in its tread to future call into question the formalist construct of language and literature prevalent in mainstream literatures. According to Edward Said, the breach of the formalist construct of language was initiated by the ethnic minority writers; the minority historical experience in them "opens literatures to the claims of raw testimonials" that "cannot be dismissed as irrelevant" (XXII). This is true of Firdaus Kanga's *Trying to Grow* (1990), Farukh Dhondy's *Bombay Duck* (1990), Bapsi Sidhwa's *The Crow Eaters* (1990), Rohinton Mistry's *Tales from Firozsha Baag* (1977), *Such a Long Journey* (1991), *A Fine Balance* (1996) and *Family Matters* (2002). All these Parsi writers expressed in their works their community's hopes and fears, aspirations and frustrations, struggles for survival and identity crisis.

The Parsis are a very small ethno-religious minority in India, living in the west coast of the subcontinent, especially in Bombay. In spite of their small number, Parsis occupy a pivotal position in India's social, cultural, political and economic history. The name "Parsis" or "Parsees"<sup>1</sup> refers to one of the places of their origin, in the Persian province called "Fars," which they left over about 1200 years ago to escape from the persecution of the invading Arabs, and to save the teachings of Zoroaster from being islamised by the Arabians (Kulke 13). As Kulke wrote, "The epoch of Persian history still relevant for the Parsees of today begins in the 6th century B.C. and ends with the conquest of Persia by the Muslims in the 7th century A.D." (13). The beginning of this epoch is characterized by the appearance of two personalities - Cyrus and Zoroaster - who became determining factors in the Persian political and religious development. "With these two names, Iran enters a period of history characterized in Greece, Israel, India and China by an extraordinary intellectual upheaval" (Kulke 14).

Iran is located geographically between two diametrically opposed poles: the ancient Mesopotamian high cultures of Sumeria, Elam, Babylonia and Assyria on the one side and the Turanian steppes of central Asia sparingly populated by nomads on the other side. These two political and cultural poles are symbolized by Cyrus and Zoroaster. While the Persian polity originated in western Iran under the Archaemenidian Cyrus, the teachings of Zoroaster were conceived in the east in direct confrontation with the nomadic culture on the threshold of myth and history. The dichotomy represents the two basic principles of Iranian history: the call to establish a universal political order and the divine mission of Ahura Mazda (Kulke 14).

Historians have different opinions concerning the time of Zoroaster's actual historical appearance. While western Iranists date Zoroaster's activity mainly in the fifth - sixth centuries BC, Greek historiographers and the present-day Parsees in India widely held that Zoroaster lived and taught between 4000 and 6000 BC (Kulke 14-5). Zoroaster's greatness is based on the ethical rebellion against a number of false deities, and for the "transcendence of one god against the demons that do not exist" (Kulke 15). Zoroaster focussed his attention "on man's behaviour and its moral drives, largely disregarding the ritualism of the worship of God" (Kulke 15) In its original form the religion founded by Zoroaster is monotheism. Zoroaster proclaimed the absolute omnipotent, eternal God, Ahura Mazda (Wise Lord), in contrast to the innumerable gods and demons of his time.

Ahura Mazda is the creator as well as the judge on the day of the last judgement... Ahura Mazda rules in this world as the ultimate supreme lord of eternity over the good spirits (Spenta Mainyu) created by him. These Spenta Mainyu as the power of light and of good are opposed in this world by the evil spirits (Angra Mainyu)... The antagonism between two antipodes makes this world a battlefield between good and evil. The good will of course prove its supremacy at the end of time, but it will be able to do so only by the complete mobilisation of all the powers of this world. Every individual human being is called upon in this dispute to stand up on his own free will for the good and to defend actively. Should he fail to side with the good he will have to share the fate of the evil (Kulke 19).

The Avesta is the holy book of Parsis. It plays a central role in Zoroaster's religion. The Avesta is attributed to Zoroaster and first written down during the time of Arsacids. It is originally supposed to have contained twenty-one books, but today it consists of only four books. Zoroaster taught "man can only attain salvation through his behaviour, not so much, however, through prayers and atonement" (Kulke, 19). Most important of the Parsi rites are purification ceremonies. Zoroaster asked his followers to take great care in keeping the body and the natural elements pure from defilement, especially though dead matter. "This explains the functions of the Tower of Silence (Dakhmas), upon which the deceased Zoroastrians are thrown to the vultures because otherwise earth, fire or water... would be defiled by them" (Kulke 19). According to Zoroastrian belief, one must undergo careful and very complex purification rites if he/she has come into contact in some way with a dead body or something impure. Most important of these rites is called Bareshnum which lasts nine nights (Modi 137). Fire is very important in Zoroastrians cult; "no ceremony can take place without fire being present" (Kulke 20). Fire is the "symbol of Ahura Mazda, the light and the truth" (Kulke 20).

It is during the period of Sassanians' rule over Persia (226-651 A.D.) Zoroastrianism became a state religion for the first time in history. This Iranian-Zoroastrian empire came to an end with the

conquest of Iran by the Islamic Arabians in the 7th century, and this has led to the exodus of the Parsees. The Parsees living in India are the descendants of a group of Persians emigrated to India after the conquest of Persia by the Arabians. However, there is no agreement among historians on the exact date of Parsee immigrations to India. "These emigrants were not, however, the first Persians on Indian soil. The pre-Islamic Persian Empires had already left their marks on the northern India" (Kulke 23). The prevailing assumptions of the circumstances and stages of the migrations of Parsee from Persia are mostly based on the chronicle "Kissah-i-Sanjan", written by the Parsee priest, Behaman Kaikobad Sanjana in Nausari. Although there are controversies regarding the credibility of its contents among historians,

It can be gathered from the Kissah-i-Sanjan that the ancestor of the Indian Parsees first sought refuge in the remote regions of Khurasan from where 100 years after the fall of the Sassanian Empire, they shifted to Hormuz on the Persian Gulf. There they stayed for 15 years in order then to move on by sea in seven ships to India... They landed at Diu (Gujarat) and were given refuge after a further 19 years by a Hindu Raja, Jadi Rana, in Sanjan where they settled for the time being (Cited from difference sources in Kulke 26).

the king of Sanjan, Jadi Rana allowed Parsees to settle in Sanjan, and he imposed certain conditions on them like they have to explain their religion to the king; they have to give up their native Persian language, and take on the languages of India; their women should wear traditional dress of India; the men should lay down their weapons, and they should hold their wedding processions only in the dark (Kulke 28). The Parsees fulfilled the first few of these conditions. Gujarati became the native language of the community and sari, the traditional garment of Parsee women. Anyhow, the Parsees managed to "Clothe their cultural concessions to their Indian environment" (Kulke 29). The Parsees began to settle in other parts of Gujarat towards the end of 10th century. Later they moved to the other parts of the country especially, Bombay.

During the course of history, the community had been at cross roads on several occasions under threats of cleansing and brutal subjection from some sections of the dominant community. The anxieties faced by the community during such crises form the thematic core of Parsi writings in India. As an ethnic minority Parsis closely watched the complex political aftermath of India's independence and when required reacted to socio-political issues such as the partition, the emergency and so on providing a Parsi view of things. Bapsi Sidhwa, for example, in her novel *The Ice-Candy Man* brings out a Parsi view of the partition through the narrative of a Parsi girl, Lenny. Rohinton Mistry's *Such a Long Journey* and *A Fine Balance* focus on some of the controversial political events such as the 'State of Internal Emergency' that rocked India during the Indira Gandhi regime of the 1970s. *A Fine Balance* also gives a picture of the Hindu-Muslims riots that followed the partition. Their novels most importantly viewed socio-political changes from a minority perspective, and attempted to bring out the predicament of minorities in India. In general, a concern for the minorities is a driving force in Parsi writing. Mistry's novels, for instance apart from presenting the problematic existence of Parsis in India (especially in Bombay), give expression to the plight of other communities and suppressed classes. The story of Chamnar caste, an untouchable community of tanners and leather workers who are brutally subjected and attacked by the majority community; and the depiction of the attack on the innocent Muslims by fundamentalist Hindus during the post-partition riots in *A Fine Balance* (1996), and the story of Hussain Miyan, a Muslim whose family members have been burned to death by the extremist Shiv Sena activists during the post-Babri Masjid demolition riots in Bombay in *Family Matters* (2002), are examples. In the course of time the Parsees, however, acquired a unique willingness to comprehend and adjust to the changing realities. The continuing aggression of the dominant, host cultures made some of them

sacrifice their traditions and convictions. Occurrences that questioned the ethnic purity of the community are seen in some of their novels. In Firdaus Kanga's *Trying to Grow* (1990), for example, Brit's family permits a sister to marry a Muslim named Salim, even though Muslims are the archetypal enemies of the Parsis (Singh 30).

Mistry's *Such a Long Journey* views India of the 1970s through the vantage point of Gustard Noble, a devout Parsi, living in Bombay. The novel showcases the predicament of Parsis in modern India who experience the agony of a cultural outsider as members of an ethnic minority. The novel is set against the background of the Indo-Pak war of 1971. Like Salem Sinai, the central character in Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, Gustard Noble, the protagonist of the novel passes through heavy odds amidst a series of political and social turmoil that India underwent during the 1970s under Indira Gandhi. The novel, like most stories in its predecessor work, *Tales from Firozsha Baag* (1977), is set in Bombay, and the story revolves around a residential complex named Khodadad Building, mostly inhabited by middle class Parsis.

Gustard Noble is a bank clerk. His devotion to his family, his faith in Zoroastrianism and his love for his friends and his community are continually tested through a series of adverse circumstances. "Loyalty and journeying constitute two major contrasting patterns in his life: the first entails constancy and commitment; the second, mutations and metamorphosis" (Malak 108). The sad predicament of Gustard evokes pity in the readers as the experience, fears, traumas and frustrations that he undergoes are those of a minority community, and in a wider sense, of all ethnic minority communities. Problems that come one after another dim his aspirations and make him distraught and helpless. He displays a strange fear that he and his community are always targeted by others, which seems to be symptomatic of a syndrome. He observes the complex political cauldron of India with suspicion, and the anti-minority attitude of a section of the dominant community raises in him fears of an impending, disastrous ethnic cleansing awaiting his community.

Disappearance of Major Bilimoria from Kododad building was the first blow that Gustard felt. Bilimoria had been a loving brother for him and Gustard considered him as "a second father" to his children (14). The second blow that deeply affected his already disturbed mind was his first son, Sohrab's refusal to join IIT in spite of being qualified with high rank in the entrance test, and his bad manners at the birthday party of Roshan, both of which culminated in Sohrab's desertion of his home. Roshan's enervating diarrhoea; the complex episodes of events that followed Gustard's receiving a parcel despatched by Major Bilimoria containing ten lakh rupees; his bosom crony, Dinshawji's illness and eventual death; the death of Tehmul Lungraa, a juvenile delinquent inmate of Khododad building and the destruction of Gustard's sacred wall by the city authorities - all these and more conspired against the normal course of events in Gustard's life.

Major Bilimoria's disappearance, and the parcel that he had despatched, however, caused considerable havoc in Gustard's small world. As the arrest of Bilimoria on charges of impersonating PM's voice over phone and receiving a large amount of money to the tune of 10 lakh rupees, had been part of a major political conspiracy, Gustard felt as if he was trapped by traitors of various types. His ordeal that resembled an epic struggle involved physical and mental torture. Gustard's ultimate escape as the representative of an ethnic minority from the tyranny of time and circumstances culminated with a feeling of reconciliation, although he had to part with some of his best-loved friends. His survival was a morale booster to all minority struggles.

In the midst of the turbulent times with regard to his personal worries and problems, Gustard was doubly troubled when he thought about the position of minorities in India. As a conscientious Parsi, he was aware of the bleak future that awaited minorities in India in general, and Parsis in particular. For him Shiv Sena was the epitome of majority's violence against minorities. When his

son, Sohrab, refused to join IIT he says, "What kind of life Sohrab going to look forward to? No future for minorities, with all these fascist Shiv Sena politics and Maharashtra language non-sense. It was going to be like the black people in America twice as good as the white men to get half as much" (55).

Gustard's friend, Malcom used to remind him that "we are minorities in a nation of Hindus" (23). And according to him the existence of minorities completely depends on the Hindus, although cow, the sacred animal of the Hindus, is the source of protein for the minorities. The fear syndrome emanated from the growing Hindu fundamentalism and sectarianism that gained momentum during the 1970s looms large in Gustard's mind. He felt that the environment is so hostile as to inflict pain on him. In spite of all the external onslaughts, Gustard remains true to himself and to his faith. Religions for him "were not like garment styles that could be changed at whim or to follow fashion", and he strongly believed that "all religions were equal... nevertheless one had to remain true to one's own" (24). Gustard defended his religion against the general cynicism prevailing in India about its rituals and practices such as the function of the Tower of Silence upon which the dead Zoroastrians are thrown to the vultures. He uncompromisingly "preferred the sense of peaceful mystery and undivided serenity that prevailed in the fire temple" (24). Gustard held that his religion had a superior claim over Christianity and Islam. Malcom used to tease him often saying that it is Christianity that had come first to India before Parsis came from Persia running away from Muslims. But Gustard was never ready to bear with any belittling of the importance of his religion. "Our prophet Zarathustra lived more than fifteen hundred years before your son of god was even born; a thousand years before Buddha; two hundred years before Moses. And do you know how much Zoroastrianism influenced Judaism, Christianity and Islam" (24).

Gustard identified Shiv Sena and Indira Gandhi's authoritarian politics and anti-minority policies as two major threats that his community had to deal with. Shiv Sena's fascist model onslaught on minorities was perhaps the most disturbing problem for Gustard. He heard goondas shouting, "Parsi crow-eaters we'll show you who is the boss"(39). Gustard and his friend Dinshawji were unhappy with Indira Gandhi, mainly because she nationalised banks which adversely affected Parsi hold on the banking industry. Dinshawji recalls that, "Parsis were the kings of banking in those days, such respect we used to get. Now the whole atmosphere has been spoiled. Ever since Indira nationalized banks" (38). They were also unhappy with Indira Gandhi for her support for a separate Maharashtra. Both the Congress and the Shiv Sena, therefore, were troublemakers as far as Parsis were concerned:

Remember when her puppy [Nehru] was Prime Minister and he made her president of Congress Party. At once she began encouraging the demands for a separate Maharashtra. How much blood shed, how much rioting she caused. And today we have that bloody Shiv Sena waiting to make the rest of us into second-class citizens. Don't forget she started it all by supporting the racist buggers (39).

The accounts of the political turmoil and the resultant subjection of the minorities referred to in the novel are not to be delimited to the mere fictionality of the novel. Rather, as Mistry is writing from the cultural sphere of an ethnic minority, these accounts are to be approached as resulting, from the writer's interest and participation in the socio-political scenario of the country in the post-independence era. Mistry foresaw the emergence of extremist forces that wage war against the cultural pluralism of Indian society. He understood the immediate threats posed by extremist organizations like Shiv Sena directly against the multicultural, multiethnic character of Indian society; the overwhelming racism and so forth. The threat of violence unleashed by the majority develops a recurring fear in Gustard's mind that eventually makes him a paranoid. Shiv Sena was

the target of Gustard's contemptuous verbal onslaught as well. He calls Shiv Sena leader worshiper of Hitler and Mussolini (73). In his view, what Shiv Sena knows was to have rallies at Shivaji Park, shout slogans, mark threats and change road names. Tehmul Lungraa was recruited once by Shiv Sena to distribute racist pamphlets against minorities in Bombay (89). During the Indo-Pak war when the streets of Bombay were blacked out at night in view of Pakistani air raids, Shiv Sena activists roamed the city streets throwing stones at windows, beating up their enemies and robbing houses (298).

Gustard, as a mouthpiece of the minorities in India, strongly attacks the Indira regime. Most of the incidents that Mistry narrated in the novel are fictional versions of real incidents happened during Indira Gandhi's period. Gustard's contempt of Indira Gandhi is on two grounds. Firstly, as I mentioned earlier, her policies such as nationalisation of banks. Secondly, and more importantly, the events connected to Bilimoria in which Indira Gandhi was a party. In fact, Major Bilimoria became a prey in the hands of political schemers in a fraudulent political conspiracy in which the Prime Minister herself was directly involved. When Bilimoria was arrested, jailed and tortured, he summoned Gustard to Delhi to tell him all that happened. Indira Gandhi asked Bilimoria to get sixty lakh rupees from the SBI director, by impersonating the PM's voice on the telephone, on an emergency basis to finance guerrilla (Mukti Bhahini) training. Major Bilimoria was also asked to write a confession which he did without any second thought. Before the money was used for the original purpose the PM's office intercepted the money. Knowing this, Bilimoria kept 10 lakh rupees to be distributed among his friends. It was this money that he had sent to Gustard to be deposited in a bank in Bombay. But as the process went on, Bilimoria was arrested, kept under detention and brutally tortured until he returned the money.

The Major Bilimoria case narrated by Mistry was based on an actual incident, popularly known as Nagarwala case which was the top story in all the leading Indian newspapers during the winter of 1971. The resemblance in both the cases is that, the persons involved were Parsis. The papers reported that "the head cashier of SBI in Delhi had given six million rupees to Mr.Nagarwala on the basis of a phone call from Mrs.Gandhi" (Quoted in Mukherjee 83). Nagarwala claimed that Mrs. Gandhi "had asked him to take this great risk in the name of Mother India. After he had delivered the cash to Mr.Nagarwala in a preassigned place the head clerk had doubts about his act and went to the police"; Mrs. Gandhi categorically denied any such telephone call and the head clerk was suspended. After a few days, Nagarwala was arrested and confessed that he had mimicked Mrs.Gandhi's voice (Mukherjee 83). The story of Nagarwala that lived in the popular imagination for a long time is retold by Mistry from the point of view of a minority community, because Nagarwala was a Parsi. "Mistry's version (of the story) like many other versions... finds Mrs.Gandhi guilty. He tells the tale from the perspective of Nagarwala who is cast as major Bilimoria. He places him in a community in Bombay and weaves a tale which is both history and fabulation" (Mukherjee 84).

The 1971 war between India and Pakistan and the political climate that existed during the period gets critical attention in *Such a Long Journey*. The novelist spells out voices of dissent when he talks about the war. As a preparation for the war threnodic sirens had been wailing every morning at exactly ten O' clock: a full three minute warning, followed by the monotonic all clear (143). All houses were blacked out. Gustard had already pasted papers on the windows as early as during the Indo-China war of 1967. He suggests that wars had become a political ritual that occurs every now and then, which isolates people confining them to blacked out houses.

A major concern in minority discourse and subaltern writing, whether fiction or non-fiction, is its interest in the socio-political conditions in which it is produced and located. Subaltern

literature, as I have previously pointed out, therefore, is not a formalist enterprise aimed at producing purely aesthetic expressions sans reality. However, the interest in the formal properties in literature is part of the bourgeois majoritarian culture and its discourses in which literature is divorced from the social. In India, the dominant form of expression was characterized by the presentations of the idealised Indian self which is defined in terms of what Romila Thapar called "Syndicated Hinduism" (Quoted in Ahmed 15-6). Mistry develops his story from the subaltern perspective, thus offering a counter narrative that subverts the predominant tendency of weaving narratives around the idealised Indian Hindu self.

All through the novel Mistry portrays the agony of a cultural outsider who is living multiple subject positions, as an Indian citizen of Parsi ethnicity. Gustard's world was full of hypocrisy and ugliness and tyranny. This adds to his being trapped between multiple subject positions. The social evils, and the human condition are presented with absolute clarity and resemblance to reality:

The society which is depicted is completely deprived of resilience. Mistry's shock at the sight of stinking human condition and rampant corruption turns him into being a realist who is obliged to expose the world around him. At times he looks like a nationalist reporting the human conditions as in itself it is. Wars between nations, the complete lack of commitment on the part of big powers and so on show the degenerating political scenario in the international politics. (Meitei; Noble and Dhawan 112).

Writing from the margins, and representing the voice of the subaltern, Mistry tries to escape the possibilities of replicating the procedures of the national literatures the premises and contours of which, as Aijas Ahmed pointed out elsewhere, were formulated by the European bourgeoisie in the period of their class hegemony and colonial expansion (15). What we come across in the general matrix of the mainstream Indian literature, therefore, is an unfinished bourgeois project which determined:

The notion of canonicity in tandem with the bourgeois, upper caste dominance of the nation state; a notion of classicism part brahminical part borrowed from Europe; the ongoing subsumptions of literary utterances and cultures by print capitalism, accommodation with regional languages but preoccupations with constructing a supra-linguistic Indian literature based on an idealised Indian self... textual attitude to lived histories; notions of literary history so conventional as to be not even properly bourgeois. (Ahmed 15-6).

The subaltern's agony as a cultural outsider has spiritual implications in the novel. The pangs of growth that Gustard experiences due to his being thrown to the margins in adverse conditions appear to be a spiritual test in which he succeeds. Gustard's quest ends in reconciliation and peace. He removes the black papers from his windows letting the rays of hope peep into his room. Although the agony gets no final solution, he had the feeling of temporarily resolving his agony as an outsider. He shows that personal integrity and right approaches (as taught by his own religion) can make man survive amidst any inclement condition. He had nowhere else to migrate to other than his own ethnicity. The spiritual solace that Gustard finds in the ethnicity of his origin, in the peaceful mystery of his community, was perhaps the force that drives not only his life, but also the lives of all ethnic minorities, who happened to live in a society mostly eclipsed by the dominant interests of a dominant community.

#### Notes:

1. Both 'Parsis' and 'Parsees' are found to be used by writers. While Kulke uses 'Parsees' in his historical writings on the community, Rohinton Mistry follows 'Parsis' in his novels.

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