

## Research Paper

## ROHINTON MISTRY'S TALES FROM FIROZSHA BAAG -AN EXPRESSION OF PARSI ETHOS.

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### ABSTRACT

*Nila Shah in "Re-Narration of History in Such a Long Journey and A Fine Balance" writes that the writers from minority communities have: "not only tried to unearth and recreate kaleidoscopic images of the past but have employed their creative talents to explore the contemporary reality and concerns about their community." (Dodiya, 2004, p.63) A close study of Rohinton Mistry's fiction reveals that like other writers from minority communities, he too, presents a picture of his community in distinct ways.*

In an interview with Ali Lakhani at the Vancouver International Writers' Festival, Rohinton Mistry says that when Parsi race is extinct, his writings will "preserve a record of how they lived, to some extent.". Accordingly, he attempts to record the story of the Parsi race and their ancient Zoroastrian faith. In another interview with Geoff Hancock, Mistry records the purpose of his writing by saying "I must write about what I know best. In that way, I automatically speak for my tribe." (Canadian Fiction Magazine No. 65, 1989) Thus, his fiction may rightly be regarded as a commentary on the domestic and social life of Parsis. It presents an authentic account of their religion, rituals, customs & manners, their fire-temples, priests, towers of silence and even their cuisine. All his works - Tales from Firozsha Baag, Such A Long Journey, A Fine Balance and Family Matters present a detailed and true account of the Parsi community and their dynamic nature.

The Parsis are very sensitive about their faith. They have maintained a separate identity on the basis of their religion. Mistry reveals before his readers the mysteries of the Parsi world. He makes them enter into Fire-temples, Towers of Silence and gives them a firsthand experience. He tells them about Parsi religious practices. He provides his readers with the aroma of the Parsi kitchen and makes them taste exclusive Parsi delicacies. He informs them about Parsi dresses and also, sudreh and kusti. He celebrates Parsi festivals like the Behram Roje with them. Parsi ceremonies like Navjote, wedding and death rites are described in such a way that the readers get a clear insight into them. It is these customs and rituals that have enabled the Parsis to retain their distinct identity in a country like India with vast cultural diversity.

In Tales from Firozsha Baag, Mistry creates a make-believe Parsi world, Firozsha Baag, in the city of Bombay. He creates it with all its religion, customs, traditions, conventions and even their food habits. The Parsis that reside in Firozsha Baag are distinct because of their religious practices and beliefs.

The first story 'Auspicious Occasion' presents a

description of religious practices and rituals related to the Behram Roje or the Parsi New Year. This is a special day for Mehroo, because her Navjote ceremony was performed on this day and Rustomji married her on the same day fourteen years ago. She remembers how on her wedding, feasting and celebrations continued till morning hours. On this occasion, she decorates the entrance with coloured chalk designs, hangs up a toran over each doorway and spreads the fragrance of loban through the flat. She has cooked Parsi delicacies, Dhandar Paatyos and Sali-boti, for dinner. Rustomji wears his exclusive Parsi outfit, a gleaming white dugli, and also puts on his pheyto (cap) and goes to Agiary or the fire temple. Mistry vividly describes the ritual of chasni when Mehroo remembers: "Then there was the ritual of chasni: all the brothers and sisters wearing their prayer caps would eagerly sit around the dining-table to partake of the fruit and sweets blessed during the day's prayer ceremonies". (TFFB, p.12)

Mistry expresses his annoyance and sorrow through Mehru's sadness about about Parsi children's reluctance towards observing Parsi religious practices like chasni. Through this, Mistry voices his concern about the slow but steady death of this age-old culture. The new generation Parsis, especially those who have migrated to the West, do not take their culture very seriously. Their old parents who are left behind are worried - whether their children follow their religious practices or not.

Mistry deals with the same aspect in the story 'Swimming Lessons'. The son, in the story, lives in Canada, and the parents do not want him to forget his culture. The father tells his wife to write to their son:

**...hard work will get him ahead, remind him he is a Zoroastrian: manashni, gavashni, kunashni, better write the translation also: good thoughts, good words, good deeds - he must have forgotten what it means, and tell him to say prayers and do kusti at least twice a day.** (TFFB, p.236)

The mother is not sure if he still wears his Sudreh and Kusti and if he remembers any of the

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prayers. Sudreh or Sudra, the spotless white shirt, stands for "true and adventurous path". It's white colour represents purity. It reminds every Parsi to follow his path even amidst adverse circumstances. Kusti is similar to Yagnopavitam worn by Hindu Brahmins. It serves as a permanent symbol of the service to God and is tied with the recitation of certain prayers. It is folded three times around the waist symbolizing good thoughts, good words, good deeds. It limits the base appetites from the lower part to cross and harm the upper part that contains important organs. While untying and tying kusti, a Parsi determines to carry on a constant struggle against the forces of Evil.

In the story 'Of White Hairs and Cricket', Mistry informs the readers that thread for Kusti, which is worn by every Parsi, is spun at home. In this story, this job is done by Mamaiji (the grandmother).

One more Parsi custom that Mistry describes in the story 'Condolence Visit' is, the wearing of a special type of headgear called pugree. This is a tall black hat that the Parsi men wear on occasions like a wedding or Navjote. Such splendid pugrees are not commonly available as not many Parsi boys, nowadays, like to wear it. Daulat advertised in the Parsi newspaper Jam-e-Jamshed that she wants to give it to a person who knows its importance. A young man arrives and she gives it to him, free of cost, though her neighbour Najmai and relative Moti opine that it should not have been given so soon after the death of its wearer. (TFFB, p.74)

Mistry presents a graphical account of the rituals observed after the demise of a Parsi. He also presents a detailed account of the death rituals and related prayers. The story 'Condolence Visit' details some rites and ceremonies related with death. Daulat Mirza has lost her husband, recently. The visits in the honour of the dead start after the dusmoo (tenth day of the demise of a person). Her neighbors and relatives pour in to express their grief and ask usual questions about her dead husband. Daulat is sick of such repeatedly asked questions and wants to leave the place for a boarding house in Udwarda to escape the agony. She even wishes she had a tape-recorder with her so that she could have played the taped answers in response to these queries. One also comes to know that Parsis use Eau de cologne on the fore-head of the dead person to avoid foul smell. When her cousin Moti comes to pay her condolence visit, she is laden with eau de cologne.

In all his novels and short stories, there are detailed descriptions of fire-temples, their inner sanctuaries and mysterious rituals performed by the priests. In the story 'Auspicious Occasion', Mehroo remembers her childhood days:

**...She loved its smells, its tranquility, its priests in white performing their elegant, mystical rituals. Best of all she loved the inner sanctuary, the sanctum sanctorum, dark and mysterious, with marble floor and marble walls, which only the officiating priest could enter, to tend to the sacred fire burning in the huge, shining silver afargaan on its marble pedestal...**

(TFFB, p.12-13)

Mistry presents Parsi women as God fearing. They follow all their rituals, customs and other religious practices, and regularly visit the fire-temples. Mehroo in 'Auspicious Occasion' observes all important days on

the Parsi calendar and attends prayers and ceremonies at the fire-temple. She follows the proper sequence of rituals and cooks special Parsi recipes on auspicious days. Mrs. Bulsara in 'The Collectors' always covers her head with a mathabanoo (a scarf). Tehmina in 'Of White Hairs and Cricket' is seen tying and untying her kusti and saying her prayers facing the rising sun. Khorshedbai in 'The Paying Guests' pays regular visits to the fire-temples. All are seen, in some way or other, following Parsi religious practices, offering prayers and spreading the fragrance of loban through their houses.

Mistry deals with the question of superstition and blind beliefs in Parsi community. In 'The Ghost of Firozsha Baag' we come across the supernatural in the form of ghost and the ways to scare the ghost. In 'Condolence Visit', the focus is on superstitions and rituals related with death and funeral rites. According to orthodox Najamai, the lamp should be extinguished after the fourth day ceremonies. This would enable the soul to go "quickly, quickly to the next world. With the lamp burning the soul will be attracted to two different places: here and the Next world. So you must put it out, you are confusing the soul..." (TFFB, p.64). In the story 'Of White Hair and Cricket', the grandmother believes that hair could be used for the purpose of black magic. Perhaps for this reason, Orthodox Parsis keep their heads covered with a white cloth or cap. Kersi's father makes his son pull out his grey hair. According to the grandmother, he was committing a sin: "Sunday dawns and he makes the child do that daleedar thing again. It will only bring bad luck." (TFFB, p.109)

The Parsis in India or in any part of the world are an ethnic minority and they have tried hard to preserve their ethnic identity. They have been practicing endogamy to preserve it which has resulted in a drastic fall in their population. Mistry is very sensitive to the anxieties felt by his community. He is aware that his culture is threatened with a slow, steady extinction. The factors responsible for this extinction are their extreme individualism, late marriages, and very often the decision to remain unmarried, low birth rate, high death rate, high rate of divorce and increasing incidences of Alzheimer, osteoporosis and mental illness. If the same rate of birth and death continues, in near future death rate will surpass the birth rate.

A. K. Singh in "Community in the Parsi Novels in English" writes:

**Rohinton Mistry has demonstrated immense ability in responding to the existing threats to the Parsi family and community... He narrates his community through the different narratives of his characters... So their stories naturally tend to be the stories of their community. By centralizing their community in their narratives they centralize and preserve and protect themselves, and thus, use it as a psychological crutch.** (Kapadia & Khan, 1997, p. 67)

#### References

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**GLOSSARY**

**1.Agiary :** Fire Temple.

**2.Asha :** The order.

**3.Druj :** Violations of the order.

**4.Manashni, gavashni, kunashni (Humata, Hukhta, Hvarshta) :** Good thoughts, good words, good deeds.

**5.Kusti :** The 72-thread girdle folded three times around the waist. Parsis consider it as the 'Pathfinder'.

**6.Navjote Ceremony :** Initiation into the Zoroastrian religion.

**7.Sudreh :** A muslin undershirt that the Parsis wear symbolizing the 'beneficial Path'.

**8.Behram Roje :** The Parsi New Year

**9.Pheyto :** Headgear

**10.dugli :** A Parsi outfit

**11.chasni :** A Parsi ritual