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Diasporic Consciousness and Parsi Identity in Rohinton Mistry'

Such a Long Journey

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Abstract

Rohinton Mistry, the diasporic writer deals with migrant experience and his works depicts parsi culture ethos, dilemma of migration, love for the homeland, hybridity and quest for identity. Mistry's deep concern for his parsi community in india and the development of post colonial India in general. The paper seeks to explore the identity and voice of the surviving diaspora in India. The story of "such a long journey" aptly communicates the feelings and apprehensions of minority community and exploited history to explore into broader concern of parsi community. The picture of anguish, the apprehension, the insecurity, the sense of alienation and sense of displacement is strongly felt by the parsis. Mistry reflects the dilemma of his minority community and it's identity crisis. Parsis are a small closely related community who face the feeling of alienation and insecurity. Decline in parsi community as close to threat of extinction. New parsi writers maintain their ethnic identity through their creative writing.

Keywords- Diasporic, Dilemma of Migration, Displacement, Alienation

Introduction

In the Parsi English novel, Jaydip Sing Dodiya remarks about Mistry,

Mistry is sensitive to the various anxieties felt by his community. He has demonstrated this by responding to the existing threats to the parsi family and community in particular, and to country in general. He presents his community

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BY

Tabish majid & Rumana nisar

through the different narratives of the characters who invariably express their concern for their community and the changes that affect them.

According to Nilufer Bharucha there were 90,000 zoroastrian parsi in the last decade of the 20th century. Of this number, 70,000 lived in India and rest in Europe and North America. There are unsubstantiated claims of another 20,000 zoroastrian in Iran and few more in Pakistan. However, even with these additional numbers, the law of statistics state the eventual annihilation of race. Khushwant Singh, showing his concern for the community has observed in his *India*:

It is a dying community: the rate of death
Is higher than the rate of birth; they admit
No converts nor recognize offspring of
Non- parsi father's as parsi. An increasing
Number of parsi girls now marry outside
the community.

Mahatma Gandhi reported to have said about parsi:" In number they are beneath contempt, but in contribution beyond compare". The parsi consider themselves as superior, hybrid westernized and idolized by the British. The post independent years left them feeling confused and bereft, hybrid community is uncertain whether to seek identity with mainstream in India or Pakistan or to seek migration to the west. Many emigrated to white land, those who remained in India needed to grapple with their loss and fit in as best as they could. In post independence period they suffered a declining status, thereby leaving many of them to crave for the good old days. The respect and admiration they coveted during British rule now replaced by scorn and mocking terms like" Parsi bawaji". The cultural differences has naturally led the native Indians to look upon them as strangers or as others. The position of parsis in Indian society is neither socially peripheral nor central. The relationship of belonging and unbelonging are unsettled and confused.

The discontent and ridicule in ones land forces an individual to seek refuge in another. Many parsi's who are highly qualified and extremely good in communication have no dearth of jobs abroad and they easily emigrate and settle in white land. The unease with their own identity in post colonial India and consequent emigration to the west too have been the focal point of parsi writers. Parsi writers are self reflective and their writing reflect on the complexity of their cultural experience. Parsi writers often try to reposes their history and display various ethno- religious traits in the course of their writing in order to assert their identity. In this process, various issues concerning the community comes into focus.

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In the 20th century, parsi's are in demographic decline. Late marriages, low birth rate, marriages outside the fold by parsi women whose offspring are then not accepted as parsi's and a ban on conversions had led to rapid declining population. Any ethnic group below the 30,000 count is termed as "tribe" not a community and at the present rate of decline it is estimated that parsi will reach that nadir in 2020. After independence majority of parsi writers went into a kind of hibernation. The independence of India created a rift between Hindus and Muslims parsi were between the devil and deep sea. The peace loving community did not know whom to affiliate with perhaps it is their non- alliance to either of the groups which led to their triumph. They withdraw into the cocoon of their and became silent on the matters of politics and communalism. The silence was sometimes punctuated by short stories, novels in English and plays in Gujarati. The silence ultimately broke in late 1970 and early 1980 by writers like Rohinton Mistry, Dina Mehta and Boman Desai. The writing in the texts of these writers displayed ethno-religious attributes. There was a feeling of alienation and insecurity experienced by diasporic community. About the novel the critic Umaisa Parameshwaran comments that "Rohinton Mistry's *Such a long journey* (1991) has recently won the Governor General award and the Commonwealth prize. Its strength lie in the authentic and delineation of parsi customs and way of life, the nobility of the central figure Gustad Nobel and the finely crafted language and prose style".

Sunitha Srinivas says, the novel deals with an authentic portrayal of the parsi's, the customs and rituals related to their community. The novelist accustoms one to another way of life and graphically describe the parsi religious customs prayers and funeral rites. The cultural distinctiveness is asserted through the use of untranslated, specifically parsi words.

Gillian Tindall has similar observation in this regard. She writes:

..... It is also true that though they have played
Something of the traditional role of the Jews
In Indian society, living between the two worlds
Of the East and West, they have seldom if ever
Aroused the antipathy that has traditionally dogged
the Jews in Europe and that their image is one of honesty.

Rohinton Mistry's *Such a Long Journey*, is enchanting account of the parsi's and their home Bombay, in general, and Gustad Nobel, a parsi protagonist and khudaya building, a parsi enclave, in particular. The novel is bf a continuation of the experience in vexation, anxieties and anguish as perceived by the characters belonging to the minority community of the parsi in the city of Bombay. The novel is a story of Gustad Nobel an ordinary pious parsi. The

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happy family of Gustad, his wife Dilnavaz, his two sons sahlab and Darius and his daughter Roshan- is met with certain inescapable adventure in life. The calamities they face are characteristically overcome by them in a manner of, as it happens in, an action and thriller movie.

Dinshawji has complaint against Indira Gandhi because she deprived the parsi, as they feel, of their traditional business of banking. Dinshawji sadly remembers, "What days those were, yaar, what fun we used to have - parsi's 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 nationalized the banks".

In 2002, Mistry cancelled his United States book tour for his novel *Family Matters* (2002) because he and his wife were targeted by security agents at every airport he visited, apparently because Mistry appeared to be muslim. He reported that, " we are greeted by a ticket agent who cheerful told us we had been selected randomly for a special security check. Then it began to happen at every single stop, at every single airport".

J.G Duress in his review of political motifs in Rohinton Mistry's novel exposes as:

Consequently, his Indian perceptions are colonised by his (Mistry) community consciousness and even by prejudices which are peculiar to the parsi race. In short, among the parsi writers who write about India, Mistry is the one who is hypercritical about even the frivolous political occurrences that may seem to affect the life of parsi in India.

The last epigraph of the novel is taken from Rabindranath Tagore's *Gitanjali*:

And the old words die out on the tongue, new
melodies break forth from the heart; and were the
Old tracks are lost, new country is revealed with its wonder.

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Diasporic Consciousness and Parsi Identity in Rohinton Mistry's *Such a Long Journey*

BY

Tabish majid & Rumana nisar

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