

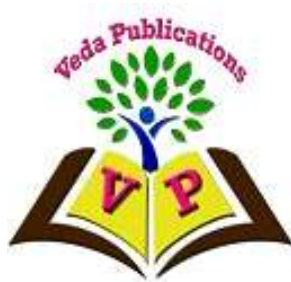


ZOROASTRIANISM AND PARSİ CULTURE IN ROHINTON MISTRY'S FICTION

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ABSTRACT



The paper also aims at throwing some light on the concerns of the community declining population, brain-drain, late marriages, a low birth rate, vanishing culture etc. This paper reciprocates the concerns and comments on the possible influences of Zoroastrianism on Judaism and Christianity in matters related to theological concepts which are common in all three religions. It highlights some of the Parsi values like purity, charity, freedom of choice, dignity of labour and truth as well as parsi traits like: hardwork, sincerity, high thinking, peace-loving nature, sense of humour and social service with reference to the works of Rohinton Mistry. It also reminds us at contribution of parsis for all round development of India.

Keywords: *Zoroastrianism -Parsi Culture- Hard working- Charity- Dignity of Labour.*



Rohinton Mistry belongs to the burgeoning crop of Indian novelists writing in English. His fiction engages not only with the experiences of a diasporic writer but also with the Parsi community, belonging to Zoroastrian minority. Mistry becomes a voice of the mute minority to chronicle a sense of crisis overtaking the community that today stares at a sense of loss. The present paper provides authentic and scholarly insights into the Zoroastrianism, Parsi culture, beliefs, values, customs and its tenets. It also meant for Zoroastrians who have felt the need for a brief description of their history and faith, as well as for non-Zoroastrians who wish to know something more about the Parsis.

Parsis have made a signal contribution to the canon of post-colonial fiction. Parsi writers like, Firdaus Kanga, Rohinton Mistry, Farrukh Dhondy, Bapsi Sidhwa, Ardashir Vakil and Boman Desai use English as an instrument of self-assertion. This self-assertion of this ethnic identity commenced in Parsi fiction in the 1980's. The Parsi writers can be classified as the second generation of Indian-English novelists, who mostly began their careers in 1980's. Among them Rohinton Mistry, as a fictional writer, occupies an important place in Indian writing in English. He is an Indian born novelist settled in Canada. Although settled in Canada for the past many years his specific concern for the problems of the fast-depleting Parsi community is well acknowledged. In the words of Vibuthi Wadhawan:

"Rohinton Mistry belongs to the burgeoning crop of Indian novelists writing in English. His fiction engages not only with the experiences of a diasporic writer but also with the Parsi community located within the national schemata. Belonging to Zoroastrian minority, Mistry becomes a voice of the mute minority to chronicle a sense of crisis overtaking the community that today stares at a sense of loss." [Vibuthi, 2014:220]

Mistry reflects Parsi community in diverse hues. His works exhibit consciousness of his community. All the concerns of the community: declining population, brain-drain, late marriages, inter-faith marriages, funeral rites, attitude to religion are aptly delineated in the works of Rohinton Mistry. The present paper provides authentic and scholarly insights into Zoroastrian's

faith, beliefs, values, customs, rituals and a brief history of Zoroastrianism in light of Rohinton Mistry's fiction. This article is also meant for Zoroastrians, who have felt the need for a brief description of their history and faith as well as for non-Zoroastrians who wish to know something more about the Zoroastrianism.

THE HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES OF PARSIS

Who are the Parsis? Many people in India are confused about the identity of this community. The Parsis are an ethno-religion minority in India living mostly in Mumbai, Karachi and Lahore. The Parsis left their home land over twelve hundred years ago to save their religion from being Islamized by the invading Islamic Arabian in seventh century A.D. The Zoroastrians trace their origins to the Indo-European branch of Aryans. They are the descendants of Aryan tribes. Since their arrival in India, the Zoroastrians have been known as the "Parsis". When the Zoroastrians decided to make their first settlement in Sanjan, the chief priest of the party asked the local Hindu king, Jadi Rana, for permission to settle in Sanjan. In reply, the Hindu ruler made five conditions:

- ★ The High Priest of the Zoroastrians would have to explain their religious beliefs to the king.
- ★ The refugees would have to give up their native Persian language and learn the local language.
- ★ The women would have to adopt the sari, the traditional Hindu dress.
- ★ The men would have to lay down their weapons.
- ★ The Zoroastrians would have to hold their wedding processions only in the dark.

That is the reason that even today the Parsi wedding ceremony is performed after sunset, Parsi women wear the sari like Hindu women, and loyalty to the ruler of the day is a strong trait among the Parsis.

ZOROASTRIANISM: IT'S PHILOSOPHY

The Parsis are followers of Prophet Zarathustra. Their religion known as Zoroastrianism was supposedly founded around 2000 B.C. Zarathustra, whose Greek name is Zoroaster. Sonika Sethi observes that:



"Zoroastrianism is an ancient religion with a complex history. It is considered to be the world's first monotheistic religion founded in the reign of Cyrus the Great". [Sonika, 2018:52]

Prophet Zoroaster preached the one true god, Ahura Mazda. Legends tell us that Ahura Mazda origin was divine. He represents truth and cosmic order and guides the world through his powers. Zoroaster preached that a battle between good and evil, between the high God *Ahura Mazda* and the evil *Ahriman* was being carried out on earth. JagadishBarta says that:

"In Zoroastrianism, there are *Mainyus* – SpentaMainya or the higher spiritual self-consciousness which leads to *humata, hukatha and huvarstha* or good thoughts, good words and good deeds and *AngraMainya* or the lower self-consciousness which leads to *dushmata* or evil deeds." [Barta; 2008:45]

According to Zoroastrianism the good and the evil forces are involved in a constant battle and in the end good will triumph. Man was given freedom of choice between good and bad. After the death, the good would go to paradise and the bad to hell. Zoroastrianism does not believe in casteism. The Parsis attach great value to righteousness, integrity and universal brotherhood. Asha denotes the divine principle of righteousness, Justice and Harmony. They believe in one god (Ahura Mazda). Prophet Zoroaster revealed the various tenants of their faith. Zoroaster's preaching's were in *Gathas* (songs of wisdom) known as the core of the Zend Avesta, the sacred Zoroastrians text: The *Gathas* are basically Zarathustra, the prophet's dialogues with god which reveals the ethical nature of the Gospel. The other religious texts are the *Yasna*, a collection of seventy-two Psalms which are part of *Avesta* and *Vendidad* which is a code of conduct with laws on purity and behaviour.

THE PRINCIPAL TEACHINGS OF ZARATHUSTRA

Zoroastrianism stress on ethics, its positive approach to life, optimism about the future of the world. It's emphasis on free choice and its catholicity. Zarathustra pointed out that in each of us there is a divine spark. It is up to us to recognize this divine spark as a practical guide in daily life, his prescription was very simple:

- ★ Think good thoughts
- ★ Speak good words
- ★ Do good deeds

It is important to know the values stressed in Zoroastrianism.

Truth: Zoroastrianism stresses truth more than anything else. A free translation of that prayer called *AshemVohy* is: truth is the greatest virtue.

Charity: In the very second prayer a Zoroastrianism child learns – the 'YathaAhuvairyo'. There is a saying: "Parsi, thy name is charity"

Purity: Purity of the body as well as that of the mind. This is why a Zoroastrian is expected to take a bath before any important ceremony.

Dignity of labour: Zoroastrianism also stresses hard work and dignity of labour

Freedom: Freedom is a fundamental value in Zoroastrian ethics, the humanity of moral agent requires that man or women should be free to choose and then be held responsible for that choice.

Zoroastrians Beliefs:

Zoroastrians believe in the life after death, the last ten days of the Zoroastrian calendar are set aside for remembering the dead. The "*Chinwat Bridge*", where the good deeds done on earth are weighed against the evil deeds. They do believe in the coming of the final saviour. They believe that there is potential for good as well as evil in every human being we should recognize it and utilize it to its fullest potential. Zoroastrians are not "Fire Worshipers". The fire is a symbol of the Zoroastrian faith just as the cross is symbol of Christianity. It is a symbol of the purity it also stands for the "inner fire" or divine spark in a human being. To the modern Zoroastrian the "Sacred Fire" is the fire within oneself with a burning desire to always succeed.

There are two symbols that Zoroastrians wear, one is '*Sudra*' a white muslin shirt. The garments colour is white because white is a symbol of purity. The other symbol is the '*Kusti*' a sacred thread tied three times around the waist. The first time a Zoroastrian wears the '*Sudra*' and the '*Kusti*' is when he or she is formally inducted into the, usually between the ages at seven and eleven. This ritual in Zoroastrianism is known as *Navjote*.

Rohinton Mistry's first novel, '*Such a Long Journey*', deals with parsis and parsi life, certain



customs, rituals related to the microscopic community are graphically described. The inhabitants of the Khodadad building are representatives of a cross-section of middle-class Parsis expressing all the angularities of the dwindling community. Gustad is introduced through his morning prayer. A detail description was given about parsi ritual and culture. The way he put on '*Kusti*' and uttered his prayers would give a non-parsi a clear idea of parsi ritual:

"Gustad finished retying the '*Kusti*' round his waist and noted with satisfaction that the two ends as usual, were of equal length. He raised and lowered his shoulders to let his "*Sudra*" settle comfortably around him..... He turned his face to the sky eyes closed and began reciting the SaroshBaaj, silently forming the worlds with his lips" [Mistry; 1991:15]

A Comparison of Zoroastrianism with existing religions in India is also done in the course of the conversation between Gustad and Malcolm his college friend. Malcolm told Gustad that Christianity had come to India over Nineteen hundred years ago with Apostle Thomas, long before the Parsis came on the western coast. Gustad retorted:

That may be, but ours prophet Zarathustra lived more than fifteen hundred years before your son of god was even born; A thousand years before the Buddha; two hundred years before Moses. And do you know how much Zoroastrianism influenced Judaism, Christianity and Islam?" [Mistry; 1991:24].

Critics have pointed out the possible influence of zoroastrianism on judaism and christianity in the following theological concepts which are shared by all the three religions.

1. Belief in one supreme and loving god .
2. The concept of heaven and hell and individual judgement.
3. A strict moral and ethical code and a belief in the ultimate triumph of good.
4. The messiah to come for the final restoration.
5. The concept of resurrection final judgement and life ever lasting.
6. The zoroastrian origin of words like Satan paradise pastor and amen.

When Gustad told Malcolm of the possible influences of Zoroastrianism on other religion, he

had then in his mind. These matters are common discourse among the parsis.

Rohinton Mistry has given an elaborate description of the rituals which are observed after the demise of a Parsi man. Gustad attended the dead body of Dinshawji on the way to the tower of silence and remained in the prayer Bungalows till the function was over. Mistry has described the bits and pieces of the parsi culture in the novel. It is apt to recollect the words of Santwana Haldar on this ritual when he says:

"The dead body is taken to the prayer bungalows in a special van known as HEARSE. Before the prayer starts the dead body was cleaned, this method which is known as *suchkaar and ablutions*. After cleansing the body it is covered with white cloth and laid on the marble platform". [Haldar, 2006; 109]

The description quoted above is not just a record of parsi ritual but a revelation of a spiritual experience gained through the music of an ancient language which has an enchanting power over the soul. There are a number of virtues in the parsi community: hard-work, sincerity, high thinking, peace-loving nature, faith in democratic values, sense of humour, charity, social service etc.. Thus parsi culture has had an ever-lasting effect on India and the Indians. N.P sharma observed: Parsi has been in India now for more than one thousand years. They have repaid the cost of the home Indian gave them many times over by playing very important roles for example in-politics (Dadabhai Naoroji) Industry (Tata) science (Homi Bhabha) and music (Zubin Mehta) [Sharma, 1998:32]

The Parsis have contributed to all round development of India. But at the end of the twentieth century the Parsi are in demographic decline. A ban on conversions, late marriages, a low birth rate, marriage outside the fold by parsi women whose offspring is then not accepted as parsi. In an interview, Rohinton Mistry has said that "when the Parsis have disappeared from the face of the earth, his writing will preserve a record of how they lived to some extent." According to a recent survey done by NDTV.com There are about 69601. Parsis living in India. This number is likely to drop down to about



20000 in the next twenty years. Sooni Taraporewala comments:

“Demographically we are a dying community-our deaths out weigh our births Mahatma Gandhi once said that in number Parsis are beneath contempt but in contribution beyond compare”.

However, the population of the Parsi community is dwindling fast. Jaydipsinh Dodiya observes that” [Dodiya,2006:6]

It is the anxiety of Parsi family handing their bigoted belief which Mistry address in his third novel *Family Matter* through the character of Yezad, he feels an overwhelming sense of ethnic belonging when he was asked to wear kusti to enter fire temple he defines religion as basic bread and water for his spirit. But with advancing age however when he joins the league of orthodox Parsis he controls his son Murad.

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