



Cultural Preservation and Adaptation: The Dynamic Identity of the Postcolonial Parsi Community in the works of Rohinton Mistry

Dr. G Venugopal

Research Supervisor
Asso. Prof. & Head, Dept. of English
Vasantrao Naik College,
Nanded (MS)

Farooq Pasha Abdul Aziz

Research Scholar (English)
S R T M U, Nanded

Abstract:

In his literature, Indian-Parsi author Rohinton Mistry, employs Parsi culture as a metaphor for twofold displacement. Through his works, Mistry intricately portrays various facets of Indian socio-economic life, including Parsi customs, traditions, and religion, illuminating the immigrant experience and the Parsi minority's struggle with identity. Despite being a tiny minority in India, Parsis grapple with ethnic anxiety and the fear of assimilation into Hindu culture. Mistry's exploration underscores the complexity of cultural preservation amidst societal change, reflecting the broader challenges faced by minority communities in a postcolonial context.

Introduction:

This research focuses on the dynamic interplay between cultural preservation and adaptation within the postcolonial Parsi community, as depicted in the writings of Rohinton Mistry. As a minority group with a rich cultural heritage, postcolonial Parsis have grappled with the challenge of preserving their traditions while adapting to changing societal norms and environments. Through Mistry's portrayal of Parsi characters and their struggles, we aim to explore the nuanced ways in which cultural identity evolves over time in the aftermath of colonialism.

Rohinton Mistry, an Indian-Parsi author, uses Parsi culture as a metaphor of twofold displacement in his writings. He explores various aspects of India's socio-economic life, including Parsi life, culture, traditions, and religion. Parsis, a tiny minority in India, struggle with identity issues, ethnic anxiety, and fear of being completely assimilated into Hindu culture.

India is a multilingual, multicultural country that has been invaded and ruled by foreigners who brought their cultures and religions, mainly Christianity and Mohammedanism. Indians are the



ideal example of 'enculturation' as they are large-hearted, open-minded, and broad-minded. They have effectively assimilated new ideas and acquired many elements of these two civilizations.

The Parsis, or Parsees, are the offspring of Zoroastrians from Persia who fled to India to escape religious persecution by Arabian Muslims. They claim to be descended from Aryan tribes that moved to West Asia, especially Iran, from the Pamirs in central Turkmenistan. India was closer to them culturally and financially than it was to them geographically. The Avesta, the Parsi sacred book, and Sanskrit are widely shared by both the Iranian people and the inhabitants of North India. Both groups are sprung from the same Aryan ancestry.

Zoroastrianism is one of the world's oldest faiths, and the Parsis adhered to its teachings. The Prophet Zarathustra established the faith as a monotheistic one, and the Parsis adhered to his teachings. They believe in Ahura Mazda, the only absolute, omnipotent, and everlasting God, and teach their followers how to live meaningful lives, enjoy everything that is good and lovely in creation, and make other people happy.

Zoroastrianism places a strong emphasis on virtues like effort, labor dignity, cleanliness, honesty, purity, and charity. True honor for the Parsis is found in working hard and doing one's duties to the best of one's ability.

Zoroastrians see fire as holy and consider communion with God to be a personal experience. At the ages of seven, nine, or eleven, a child is introduced into the faith at certain rites, such as the 'Navzote' ceremony. In a marriage ceremony, the couple faces one another, places a screen between them, and tosses rice at one another. With witnesses to attest to their desire, the priest asks the couple three times whether they are willing to be married.

Dead remains are never buried nor cremated, but instead, they are dumped for vultures to consume at a location known as the 'Tower of Silence.' Since their arrival in India in the eighth century, Parsis have blended into Indian culture while clinging to their own ethnic identity, traditions, and rituals.

Prominent Parsi author, Mistry focuses on the lifestyle and cultural legacy of the Parsi people to portray the distinctiveness of the Parsi community. His works include tales from *Firozsha Baag*, *Such A Long Journey*, *A Fine Balance*, and *Family Matters*, which include Parsi protagonists who honor the historically problematic identity of the Parsi people.



Firozsha Baag is a collection of short tales by Rohinton Mistry, which portrays the Parsi community in Bombay. The collection includes eleven tales from a small apartment complex, where residents reside. The narrative 'Auspicious Occasion' centers on the day-to-day activities and customs of Rustomji and Mehroo, a Parsi couple who embrace their minority by marking significant days in their society. All of the Parsi community's traditions and rituals are highly valued, and they consider it their duty to commemorate Zoroastrian holidays that set them apart from other cultures.

In *Such a Long Journey*, Mistry delves into his culture's rituals and traditions, with a focus on the Parsi community. After losing her spouse Minocher, Daulat Mirza, the protagonist, loses her spouse and begins the condolence visit. She chooses to extinguish the lamp, keeping the bedroom locked to prevent interruptions from guests. The pugree, distributed to the men at the elderly home after Minocher's clothing is given away, is the most significant emblem.

The author depicts the typical middle-class Parsi population of the 1970s living in Khodabad building complex. The Parsi fondness for food is highlighted in the first tale 'Auspicious Occasion.' The book questions the veracity of historical accounts and the dubious practices of the government by bringing up the intersections of religion and politics. Along the way, Mistry chronicles the everyday, apolitical Parsi existence that is caught between the currents of national and ethnic identity and the forces of modernity that pose a danger to the community's way of being.

The Khodadad Building is an engrossing examination of the challenges, anxieties, and vulnerabilities faced by the Parsi community. The tale emphasizes the value of religious practice and the distinctive methods used by the Parsis to dispose of their dead. The distinctive Zoroastrian practice of feeding the deceased to vultures—an environmentally benign procedure that doesn't damage the land or cause fire—is what defines Parsi culture. The Parsi belief in the sagduid, a ceremonial 'seeing' of the deceased by a sag (dog), is the foundation of this tradition. Modernists often criticize these customs and rituals because of the ambiguity surrounding their literal interpretation.

Reformist Parsis are discussing at the Tower of Silence how to bury the deceased; some are in favor of cremation. The conventional argument is that it's a pure procedure that doesn't tarnish any of God's wonderful creations. However, reformists contend that the antiquated approach is inappropriate for the twenty-first century since it failed to develop into a society known for its progressive reputation and forward-thinking outlook.



The use of antibiotics and the anti-inflammatory drug diclofenac on people and cattle has had unexpected repercussions that have negatively impacted vulture populations in Mumbai and Karachi. As a result, the dead's remains take longer to decay, which causes issues for other people.

A Fine Balance is a novel by Rohinton Mistry, which explores the experiences of rural people in India during emergency rule. The book features Dina Dalal and her brother Nusswan, who symbolize the Parsi community, highlighting their struggles to preserve their religious customs, superiority complex, attitude towards Indians, dietary preferences, and current state of affairs. Mistry's work is community-focused, culturally unique, and ethnocentric, addressing concerns of growing independence, filial devotion, and competing needs of family and community within the Zoroastrian ethnic group.

The novel highlights the exceptional qualities of the Parsi community, including exclusivity, ethnic purity, and cultural supremacy. The community's belief that Renegades would destroy its three thousand-year-old faith is threatened by the community's concern that Renegades would destroy it. The book emphasizes the importance of preserving the purity of race and blood, with the 'Navjote' ceremony being a significant event for properly admitting a Zoroastrian child into the faith.

The Parsis, who have flourished and escaped invasion, fear for their future due to Western ideas of liberty and privacy. They worry that the low birth rate is caused by high levels of education, a declining birth rate, and widespread migration to the west. Inspector Massalawala predicts that there won't be any Parsis remaining in fifty years. Dr. Fitter suggests that youngsters should not pursue more education than a bachelor's degree, provide financial incentives to study less, and mandate that they have as many children as the number of adults in their household who are over fifty.

The Parsis take pleasure in their high level of education and freedom of movement with colonists but must maintain their way of life before the needs of any one person. The group believes that contemporary concepts mislead children, encouraging selective absorption of modern ideas. Nariman Vakil, a highly educated English literature professor, is compelled to marry a Parsi widow with two children, leaving him with his biological daughter Roxana. Yezad and Roxana try to care for the elderly man, but face financial difficulties.

Religion can be hazardous and destroy societal cohesion when reduced to extremism. The radical cruelty of Shiva Sena is a serious danger to Bombay's various groups, including the



Hindu population. Kapoor, a Diaspora, suffers from Yezad's financial blackmail tactics, leading to his job termination and Yezad turning to religion as a full-time source of comfort.

Mistry denounces Yezad's narrow-minded views that restrict personal religion and the Shiv Sena's primitive core characteristics. He advocates for a more compassionate and inclusive approach to all individuals, especially those who are marginalized, oppressed, vulnerable, and in need, as a Parsi. His conception of culture is wholly altruistic, placing a strong emphasis on tolerance, empathy, and compassion.

References:

- Mistry, Rohinton. *Such A Long Journey*. London : Faber and Faber, 1992. Print.
- Mistry, Rohinton. *A Fine Balance*. London : Faber and Faber, 1995. Print.
- Mistry, Rohinton. *Family Matters*. London : Faber and Faber, 2002. Print.
- Mistry, Rohinton. *Tales from Firozsha Baag*. London : Faber and Faber, 1991. Print.
- Bala, Suman. *The Writer Par Excellence*. New Delhi : Khosala Book House, 2013. Print.
- Gourishankar, Prasad. *Cultural Anthropology*. New Delhi: Crescent Publication, 2012. Print.
- Sampath, K. *Basavannavara Vachana Samputa*. Bangalore: Prakash Book House, 2010. Print.
- Sidhwa, Bapsi. *An American Brat*. New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1994. Print.
- *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of current English*, 8th Edn. Ed R.E. Allen, OUP, 3rd Edn. 1992. Print.
- Wadhawan, Vibhuti. *Parsi Community and the Challenges of Modernity : A Reading of Rohinton Mistry's Fiction*. New Delhi : Prestige Books, 2014. Print.