

Tale Of A Pariah: Zoroastrian Worldview In Cyrus Mistry's *Chronicle Of A Corpse Bearer*

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Abstract

The contribution of Parsee writers to the corpus of postcolonial discourse is singular. They are akin to the Jewish writers like Saul Bellow and Bernard Malamud who sought to express their ethnic identity in artistic terms. The Zoroastrian worldview, which is life – affirming, provides sustenance to the Parsee community. The Parsee system of the disposal of the dead is unique. This paper attempts to study Cyrus Mistry's novel Chronicle of a Corpse Bearer which deals with the trauma of a nussesalar, a corpse bearer. Phiroze, the centre of consciousness represents the khandhias, the ostracized among the marginalized Parsee community. His tale gives us a peep into the abysmal and turbulent psyche of the khandhias. It is the account of a pariah who rejects the Zoroastrian worldview and leads a life of his volition.

Key words: Zoroastrian, nussesalar, khandia, marginalized, turbulent, life-affirming

Introduction:

Zoroastrians, also known as Parsees, have made a signal contribution to the corpus of postcolonial discourse. Bapsi Sidhwa is an expatriate Parsee writer who not only deals with the pangs of dislocation but also voices concern over the diminishing Parsee community. Rohinton Mistry, Boman Desai, Firdaus Kanga and Farrukh Dhondy, in the process of asserting themselves, redefine the ethnic identity of the Zoroastrian community. At the same time, they are very much alive to the challenges confronting the microscopic community such as mixed marriage and demographic decline. Akin to many Indian writers of the nineties like Salman Rushdie and Arundhati Roy, they employ innovative English to highlight the ambivalence, the nostalgia and the dilemma of the endangered Parsee community. The Parsees are to Indian literature in English what the Jewish writers like Saul Bellow and Malamud are to American fiction. According to a view, Parsee novel in English is a potent index of the Zoroastrian ethos. Here the 'operative sensibility' is essentially Zoroastrian. Thus Parsee novel gives us a peep into the turbulent Parsee psyche (Kumar: 32)

Zoroastrianism does not attach undue importance to ritualism and external practices of imaginary value. Kulke, a noted Parsee historian, observes:

Rites in Parsism are less important
Than ethical dimensions. Man can only
Attain liberation through his behaviour,
not so much, however, through prayers and
Rites of atonement (Kulke: 19)

The significance of Zoroastrian worldview lies in upholding good thoughts (*humata*), good words (*hukhta*) and good deeds (*hashtag*). Rabindranath Tagore points out that

Zoroaster proclaimed in the dark days of ignorance and superstition that religion has its truth in its moral significance (Tagore: 47). However certain rituals are central to the Zoroastrian way of life since they are invested with symbolic value.

Some Zoroastrian customs are esoteric. *Navjote* is an initiation rite through which every Parsee boy or girl has to pass through. Similarly the corpse of a Parsee is shown to a dog. The Zoroastrians believe that canines have an ‘uncanny ability’ to sniff out the slightest flicker of vitality persisting in a body presumed dead. Likewise the Parsee system of disposal of the dead bodies is unique. Kulke observes:

the Zoroastrians are asked again and again to take the greatest care in keeping the body and the natural elements earth, fire and water pure from defilement especially through dead matter. this explains the function of the Towers of Silence (*Dakhmas*) upon which the deceased Zoroastrians are thrown to the vultures because otherwise earth, fire or water – according to the method of burial - would be defiled by them (Kulke: 19).

The body of a Parsee is consigned to the Towers of Silence. It lies exposed to heat of the sun and thus becomes food for vultures. It is the last act of charity of a Parsee on earth. Defending the ancient method of disposal of dead bodies by Parsees, Arun Mukherjee writes:

The Parsee funeral rites have evoked this response from Westerners ever since the time of contact. Such epithets, I believe, only show the low level of tolerance for any kind of deviation from the western norm. I think that the Parsi method of disposal of the dead is not only environmentally sound but also suggests a profound acceptance of inter connectedness of all life (Mukherjee: 86).

Certain customs and rituals thus continue to offer sustenance and moral strength to the Zoroastrian community though the Westernized Parsees and the expatriates view them with scepticism.

Cyrus Mistry’s *Chronicle of a Corpse Bearer* marks an entry into the dark and obscure world of the *Khandhias*, the corpse bearers who stand ostracized by their own Zoroastrian community. They live on the fringes of society. They are the marginalized among the marginalized Parsee community. Mistry’s novel has one *leitmotif*, i.e. the disposal system of the dead which forms the core of the narrative.

The occupational structure in the Zoroastrian community was as follows:
Avesta Society



These four socio-economic classes are strikingly similar to the four *Varnas* in Hinduism. Eckehard Kulke contends that this division according to occupational classes did not result in the formation of a caste-system. He adds that there were no socio-religious taboos attached to any class (Kulke:48). However taboos do exist in the miniscule Zoroastrian community even today. The stigma attached to the profession of corpse bearers in the Parsee community is central to Cyrus Mistry's narrative purpose in *Chronicle of a Corpse Bearer*.

II

Phiroze, the centre of consciousness in the narrative, is a *nussesalar* who works in the Towers of Silence by choice. Son of Framroze, the priest in the Fire Temple, he marries Seppy, the daughter of a *Khandhia*. Framroze is a protagonist of the Zoroastrian value system and culture. He regards his son's decision to marry Seppy as an outrage, an insult. He asks his son:

But do you know what this is all about,
what choice you are being asked to make?
Do you know what it means to live the
life of a Khadhia? (Mistry: 83).

The life of a corpse bearer is a hand to mouth existence. He is treated as a pariah, an outcast. Though scholars like Kulke refuse to admit, untouchability is still practiced, however covertly, in the Zoroastrian community. The *Khandhias* are not supposed to use lift or touch anything. Theirs is a menial, unenviable task. Cyrus Mistry's black humour pervades the narrative. Phiroze observes once:

And all corpses aren't emaciated by
death, let me tell you. Some positively
swell, growing more flaccid by the minute.
Besides, how else, I ask you this, how else
are the best of us to keep up this carrion
work, this constant consanguinity with
corpses, without taking a drop or two?
The smell of sickness and pus endures,
the reek of extinction never leaves the
nostril (Mistry: 10)

Phiroze, of his own volition, makes a choice to live in *Doongerwadi*, but his work is, by no means, easy:

No, I don't mean the physical strain –
that can be rough, no doubt – so much
as the contempt and abuse we receive
for doing a job no one else will touch
(Mistry: 12)

However it is Seppy who makes that life endurable for him. He is a 'captive in Paradise'. Referring to the issue of marriage in the Parsee community, Mistry makes an interesting observation:

Generation of inbreeding within families
belonging to the small sub-caste of
corpse bearers – together with a self-imposed
and socially enforced isolation – had rendered
them freakish, awkward and genetically
unsound (Mistry: 17)

Despite the warnings of the people that it would be 'disastrous' for first cousins to marry, they ignore the 'alarmist' talk and get married. Farida, their daughter, is born perfectly normal.

The gap between the ideal and the real constitutes irony. Mistry employs irony to project his viewpoint which is radically different from the conventional Zoroastrian worldview. Phiroze is expected (by his father) to become a priest but ironically he chooses to be a *nussessalar*. His marriage with Seppy brings about estrangement from his family. However Phiroze sets, out on a "journey of mutual self-discovery" with Seppy. Their life after marriage is 'segregated' and 'narrow'. It is 'microcosmically cloistered' yet beautiful in its own way since it is Seppy who sustains his life.

The *Khandhias* are caught in a tragic dilemma from which they strive to escape but it is an exercise in futility. Phiroze, who lives in a fool's paradise, at least initially, assumes an air of superiority while making his position clear. He observes:

By rights of course, I do rank higher
than a mere corpse bearer (Mistry: 17)

He is a *nussesalar* with a difference. *Nussesalars* are invested with several priestly, ritualistic duties. However life is a veritable hell for them. Mistry remarks:

In return for which noble service, the
scriptures promise, his soul will not be
reborn. The nusesalar who performs his
duties scrupulously, forever escapes the
cycle of rebirth, decrepitude and death.
What the scriptures forget to mention,
though, is that in this, his final incarnation,

his fellow men will treat him as dirt, the
very embodiment of shit: in other words,
untouchable to the core (Mistry: 18)

Phiroze regards himself as a 'glorious untouchable'. His predicament, however, is self-made.

Though a Parsee by birth, Phiroze does not believe in the Zoroastrian worldview which promises a better life for the Parsees who lead a pure and virtuous life. The glorious Zoroastrian past is a myth for him since it offers nothing concrete in his life. Similarly the conflict between Good (*Spenta Minyu*) and Evil (*Angra Mainyu*) and the ultimate triumph of Good over Evil are all 'nonsensical thoughts' to Phiroze. His angst is existentialist in its intensity. He challenges certain verities in Zoroastrianism. He questions the very existence of *Ahura Mazda*, the Supreme God in Zoroastrianism.

If there is a God who is responsible for
all the profusion of life and locomotion in
the universe, then surely that being has arrived
at an advanced stage of senility, I declare,
or one of cynical and extreme indifference
(Mistry: 170).

Phiroze scoffs at all the major tenets propounded in Zoroastrianism. He observes once:

Because, if the dead are really and truly
dead, null and void, snuffed out without a
trace – then everything we grow up believing
in is a lie. All religion, theology, my father's
life and beliefs and prayers, the pumped – up
'power of faith' – everything is simply
wishful fantasy (Mistry: 155)

According to Phiroze, the fate of *nussesalarsis* due to the Zoroastrian worldview which is too conservative and hence outdated. It paved the way for exploitation of *Khandhias*. He says:

I suppose the truth was that centuries
of oppression and indoctrination had effectively
robbed them of imagination required to
conceive of a different order of life, or to
question a creed according to which the
Almighty creator had relegated them to
such a lowly, depraved existence while
hypocritically promising them (at least as
nussesalars) liberation from rebirth for
faithfully carrying out their laborious duties
in this lifetime (Mistry: 111).

Socio-political developments like the Second World War, Quit India Movement and freedom at midnight do influence Phiroze to a considerable degree, however covertly. In the beginning, however, Phiroze evinces no interest in politics:

It wasn't our own world, though,
and we didn't have much to do
with it (Mistry: 124)

He believes that his life is unaffected by the political developments:

So far removed were we from these
fateful eventualities of history that,
except by a complex chain of inferences
and deductions, none of them touched
our personal lives at all (Mistry: 124)

Thus *History* is *history*. It percolates through the prismatic consciousness of the protagonist. It is not Gandhi's non-violence but Udham Singh's heroism that fires the imagination of Phiroze. He registers protest against the oppression of *nussesalars* by the Zoroastrian elite. He proclaims:

The chains of a slave are broken the
moment he considers himself a free man
(Mistry: 116)

Phiroze is an iconoclast, a rebel in his own right. He plunges into intense anguish after the untimely death of Seppy. He muses:

Was there simply no justice or propriety
in the universe? (Mistry: 147)

His speculations assume metaphysical profundity:

Dreams, reality, nightmares – are these,
in fact, distinct planes of consciousness?
Or merely different modalities for perceiving
the one grand canvas of an indivisible
reality? (Mistry: 130)

It is Seppy's death which makes him realize the transitoriness of human existence. He muses:

Perhaps life is like that: slippey, elusive,
impossible to get a hold on. The difference
between this moment and the next is only
one of awareness.... yet we drift from
morn till night, from day through week
through months and years distracted,
inattentive and completely unprepared for
the ambush – the moment of our

inevitable extinction (Mistry: 154)

Phiroze's loss of love is instrumental in the dawn of wisdom. He observes:

But I've noticed, elaborate systems of
belief have been concocted and espoused
over the centuries by man merely to
butterss this sad need for meaning,
indeed to make life's transience bearable
(Mistry: 147)

He accepts the inevitability of human suffering. He observes:

I'm not talking merely about the misery
of the poor or the disingenuousness of the
powerful, but of that unstoppable merry-go-
round of human suffering, of the
abominable lack of any higher meaning or
significance to life, entirely at the mercy
as it is of random death (Mistry: 226).

Phiroze's life remains static after Seppy's death and he remains deliberately blind to the political developments in the country since they do not alter his dreary existence in any conceivable way. His conclusion is existentialist:

.... the torrent of human suffering ran
unabated shutting out every glimmer of
hope (Mistry: 226).

According to Zoroastrian worldview, suffering ennobles one and serves as a platform for surmounting specific flaws in one's own character. They are 'opportunities to polish our spiritual selves' in the process of becoming better beings. Phiroze's small scale reflections on life and death are pregnant with remaining:

Though death is its precise reason for
existence, in this garden, life – over overwhelmingly –
is the victor (Mistry: 11).

What Phiroze infers is that it is life that triumphs ultimately over death. Ironically this is the quintessence of Zoroastrianism, though Phiroze overtly rejects the Zoroastrian worldview.

III

Conclusion

Thus the Parsee disposal system of the dead forms the nucleus of Mistry's narrative. It is curious to note that a few other Parsee writers did deal with this aspect of the Zoroastrian worldview. Keki Daruwalla's poem, "Fire Hymn" focuses on the anguish of a Parsee who fails to bring the body of his first born to the Tower of Silence as it is a thousand miles away. He is compelled to consign the body to the flames. He vows to save fire 'from the sin of forgiving'. Similarly Freddie, the protagonist in Bapsi Sidhwa's *The Crow Eaters* cremates

the body of his son Soli since there is no *dakhma* in Lahore. The Zoroastrian worldview which kept the community together for several centuries, no longer sustains the Parsees of our times. Some Parsee novelists like Firdaus Kanga, Bapsi Sidhwa, Rohinton Mistry, Boman Desai and Farrukh Dhondy are relatively sceptical and view the Zoroastrian value system with a sort of cynical detachment. There is an undercurrent in the works of these novelists which suggests that the Parsee community should move with the times

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