

## AGE OLD ZOROASTRIAN BELIEFS V/S COMMITTED LOVE IN CYRUS MISTRY'S *CHRONICLE OF A CORPSE BEARER*

**Kiran Deshwal**  
Research Scholar  
Dept. of English  
University of Rajasthan  
Jaipur ( Rajasthan )

Parsi community is a small one in India. They believe in Zoroastrian customs and traditions. Their system for the burial of the dead is unique in itself. They expose the deceased to the 'Towers of Silence' situated at Malabar hill in Mumbai. It is a circular, raised structure used by Zoroastrians for exposure of the dead, particularly to scavenging birds for the purposes of excarnation, also known as a Dakhma and "Cheel Ghar" in Hindi. People of Zoroastrian tradition consider a dead body to be *nasu*, unclean, i.e. potential pollutants. Specifically, the corpse demon (Avestan: *nasu.daeva*) was believed to rush into the body and contaminate everything it came into contact with, hence the Vendidad (an ecclesiastical code "given against the demons") has rules for disposing of the dead as "safely" as possible. To preclude the pollution of earth or fire the bodies of the dead are placed on the top of a tower—a tower of silence—and so exposed to the sun and to scavenging birds.

Cyrus Mistry's DSC prize winner novel *Chronicle of a Corpse Bearer* (2012) depicts the life of a Parsi corpse bearer Phiroz Elchidana. His duty is to carry bodies of the deceased to the Towers of Silence. He is segregated and shunned from society just because of his profession. He is wretchedly poor. He is courageous enough to accept this job that nobody would willingly espouse just for the sake of love. He scribes the events of his life honestly from a true lover's heart. His coming of age is interwoven with various experiences about love, society, religion, politics, history etc.

Phiroze's life is trapped between age old beliefs of Zoroastrians and his unflinching love for Sepideh (Seppy) a khandhia's daughter, which he determines to save on all costs. The son of the head priest of a Zoroastrian fire temple, Phiroz lives with his parents and his brother Vispy. Phiroz flunks his graduation exams, and while supposedly studying for the retake, he takes to wandering all over the city of Bombay instead, later recalling his solo outings as "the best moments of my youth." One day, he finds himself at Doongerwadi Hill, the estate of the Towers of Silence, where he starts spending all of his time enjoying "the sanctuary of its woods". It is a Parsi religious estate where, after certain rituals, the dead are placed for the vultures and the hot sun "in a final act of charity."

At the age of seventeen, One day Phiroz happens to meet Sepideh while he was returning from a funeral with his mother from towers of silence. He beautifully describes his first sight at Seppy: "... I caught my first glimpse of her in the far distance. Long- boned and gangly, with a shock of thick uncombed curls, a wild – looking creature about my age... who was she ? what was she doing there all by herself in the woods?" (Mistry 73)

Though she disappeared at that moment; upon returning the next day, he finds her in the woods of Doongerwadi. She was reclining on the low drooping bough of a mango tree with her

eyelids shut. Later, it became a usual place of their meeting. After this they made love in the dark lonely place ‘grotto’. Here, Phiroz realized the true love of Seppy for him through physical contact. He tells that she was confident rather than afraid “she was not afraid. She trusted me. ...osmotically, as it were- through touch and caresses – she communicated her own strength and fearless to me.” (Mistry 76). As he notes, "it only took that first physical touch," and they knew they were destined to be together. The girl Sepideh (Seppy), unknown to Phiroze, is an estranged first cousin as well as the daughter of one of the khandhias, or Parsi corpse bearers, who bring the corpses to the Towers of Silence and prepare them for mourners and their ultimate fate. Her father demands that if the two continue to see each other, Phiroze must marry her, work and live out his life as a corpse bearer, a situation that will make Phiroze a pariah to his family and all outside of this small community. Despite his father's wishes, Phiroze gladly accepts the terms just to get Seppy’s love. He tells us:

My own case was completely unusual, of course: “people were usually shocked and disbelieving when they learned that I voluntarily chose to marry a khandhia’s daughter, opting for a life at the Towers of Silence. (Mistry 17)

When Phiroze’s father Framroze come to know the fact he becomes angry. He calls it an intrigue of Temoorus to take revenge for the ill fate and painful death of Rudabeh (Seppy’s mother, a step sister of Framroze whom he betrays). Phiroze’s mother urges him not to do so. She weeps. But in vain as Phiroze’s decision to marry Seppy is unshakable. According to Zoroastrian customs it is a sin to marry first cousin. Phiroze is ready to accept each condition set by Seppy’s father. He neglects all superstitions relating dire consequences marrying first cousin. He don’t believe in age old customs even after Seppy’s immature death just seven years after their marriage. He asserts his love for Seppy and states firm intention to marry her in front of his father to which his father responses like this :

Anyway you can’t marry such a close relative, you should know that, you fool. 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 khandhia ? ... nussesalar ? well, that might be preferable, I suppose, to being a mere khandhia. It’s supposed to be a noble vocation that’s true ... but you would still remain an outcast, don’t forget. Ostracized from society, unable to meet your family... even if you went through all the purificatory rites and rituals, and even if I was sure you had been through them diligently and precisely, without being lax or slipshod, I still wouldn’t want you to enter my fire temple... (Mistry 83-84)

Phiroze’s work is not only tedious but also contemptuous as he asserts at the beginning of the novel:

Can’t deny I always knew It would be rough. It’s more than most people can stomach, many had warned me: let alone you, the coddled son of a priest. But in those first years, Seppy was at my side. Nothing, not the direst predictions of ruin and misery could kept us apart. People said it was disastrous for first cousin to wed, that our children would be cretins! But we never felt we had a choice, you see. And never once in those seven years did I ever feel let down, or regret my decision. (Mistry 12-13)

The course of the novel focuses on his life in a very traditional and secluded community, which in time, slowly begins to undergo change, while on the outside, India is rapidly changing,

moving from the end of its colonial period into independence and partition, and later, on into the modern era. Nowhere we found that Phiroze regrets his decision. He is totally devoted towards his tiring job even after Seppy's death. The Doongerwadi woods which seems scary to others for Phiroze it was a heaven where he can feel the presence of his love even after her death. He writes:

How beautiful and peaceful is this place- much of the time, at least- where the faithful consign their dead to the vultures in a final act of charity, their bones pulverized by the sun, then washed away... subsumed in the elements... I began to see this as my garden, my own private forest: an enchanted place in which I was free to roam...(Mistry 11)

Despite of the heap of dead corpses and a gloominess everywhere with groups of mourners; it is the feeling of love which never lost its way from the heart of Phiroze. Even the most fleeting remembrance of Seppy could bring tears to his eyes. Whenever he returns from his tiring work he feels Seppy here and there in the woods, where she used to swing on the roots of banyan tree and roamed about feeding wild birds and animals. Though Seppy is no longer with him but his heart ached each moment with the longing for the woman who had taught him how to love.

Phiroze also broods over the irony of Zoroastrian religion. He was a nussesalar who shields the community from all that is considered evil. In return of this noble service, the Parsi scriptures promise, his soul will not be reborn. He skillfully writes:

the nussesalar 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 the other words untouchable to the core. (Mistry 18)

Phiroz was not alone to bear this contempt for them of high class Parsi people his fellow corpse bearers Fali, Temoo, Boman, etc. are also the victims of the injustice. They were underpaid and taken in work more. If they made any mistake their job was at stake by people such as Buchia and Coyaji. These people were less sympathetic to them.

Temoorus was a bitter enemy of Phiroze's father he wants to avenge some ancestral enmity. He involved her daughter Seppy to seduce Phiroze. But they loved each other truly and Phiroze abandoned his patriarchal job gladly for Seppy. Though Phiroz has to pay a lot for that. Later Temoo laments on the death of Seppy that it was an outcome of his trick.

Phiroze became a lifetime pariah for the sake of Seppy's love. Though he forgives everyone who hated him for his job. His orthodox father never allowed him to enter his house. Even the lifelong menace i.e. he has to remain an outcaste for whole life if he marries to Seppy his decision is unflinching. It was inevitable for him to leave the Khandhia's job after Seppy's death. But he neither become disappoint nor sad on this. Nowhere in the novel he lost his connection with his love whether he is talking about past, present and future time. He works with patience throughout his life. He loves and cares a lot their daughter Farida as he promised to dying Seppy. Seppy and her love become a path guider for him for the rest of his life. He realizes her presence twice even after her death; once when the corpse collapses and secondly when he went to bring left outs from his home after his father's death. It was dead Seppy who reminds him the ruby earrings of her mother which should gone to Farida (Phiroze's daughter) then. Seppy become a spiritual force after her death as she used to believe that a body never dies. The novel ends with a strong belief of Phiroze in Seppy's presence : "Seppy assured me that the dead

were not dead at all, but still alive”. Again he describes his limitless, endless love for her : “I know she is still out there waiting for me. That I will meet her again...” (Mistry 245).

### Workcited

A truly fine novel: Chronicle of a Corpse Bearer, by Cyrus Mistry, review by Nancy Oakes. *The Year in Books -- a casual and very random ordinary reader's journal*. Friday, May 23, 2014 <https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/15752549-chronicle-of-a-corpse-bearer>. 10/15/2014. web

Alikhan, Anvar. “Lord of the Untouchable: Chronicle of a corpse bearer: A dark little secret of the Parsi community”. July, 27, 2012. *India Today*. [indiatoday.intoday.in](http://indiatoday.intoday.in) › Archive › Leisure › August 6, 2012. Web.

Mistry, Cyrus. *Chronicle of a Corpse Bearer*. New Delhi :Aleph Book Company, 2012. Print.