

PARSI RELIGION: IN THE FICTION OF ROHINTON MISTRY

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This paper acts as a window to the Parsi world to its readers giving us all the details about their life style, their culture, traditions, food habits and other day to day habits. Before we come to cultural representation in terms of institutions, rituals and social mores, it is essential to grasp the essentials of Zoroastrianism. The word, Zoroastrianism is etymologically derived from the root word 'Zoroaster'. Zoroaster is the Greek version of the Iranian name Zarathustra. The followers of Zarathustra regard him as the originator of their religion. Sacred text of Zoroastrians is known as Avesta. Zoroastrianism came to India in 7 A.D. to Gujarat in particular as a result of persecution by Muslims in Iran. Parsi's faith is very simple. It subscribes to one God Ahura Mazda who is responsible for ensuring goodness in the world and hereafter. This God Ahura Mazda is all good. He is the force of the good. Opposing him is Ahriman who through dark endeavors opposes and oppresses goodness and does not want goodness to prevail. Man must choose Ahura Mazda and defeat the forces of evil which he can do with good thoughts, good words, good deeds. Zoroastrianism is the oldest surviving religions of the world. Humata, Hukhta, Huvarshta (Good thoughts, Good words and Good deeds) are the basic conviction of Parsi doctrine.

Among all the cultural markers of Parsi religion "The Tower of Silence" and "The Fire Temple" are adjudged as the most significant emblems of faith. The Gospel of Zarathustra, the Gathas, it is believed covered all the ground from the Rig- Veda to the Bhagwad Gita, a period extending over 1,500 years at least, in the short span of a single generation ... Zoroastrianism lies, thus, at the center of all the great religions of the world, Aryan and Semitic. (Sidhwa, *The Crow Eaters* 52)

Parsis expose their dead bodies to vultures on the "Tower of Silence" (dakhma) usually built on a hilltop. The dakhma is a round stone or brick structure about 15 metres high and perhaps 100 metres across with an internal platform on which there are three ranks of stone slabs, for the bodies of men, women and children inclined down toward a central dry well. The bearers put the body there and within an hour or so, vultures reduce it to bones. After a few days the corpse bearers return and throw the bones down the central well. It has sand and charcoal in it, the function of the charcoal is to protect the earth from the pollution of death. Zoroastrians believe in the immortality of the soul. It remains around the dead body for the next three days.

The custom of leaving their dead in the Tower of Silence becomes a source of altercation between the purists who based their arguments on, 'The orthodox defence was the age-old wisdom that it was a pure method, defiling none of god's good creations: earth, water, air and fire.' (SALJ 317)

Bapsi Sidhwa observes in this regard:

Parsis are a tiny community who leave their dead in open roofed enclosures atop hills – to be devoured by vultures. The British romanticized this bizarre graveyard with the title ‘Tower of Silence’

[...] the marble floor slopes towards the centre where there is a deep hollow. This receives the bone and blood. Underground ducts from the hollow lead to four deep wells outside the Tower. These wells are full of lime, charcoal and sulphur and provide an excellent filter. The outer rim of the floor is made up of enough marble slabs to accommodate fifty male bodies, then comes accommodation for fifty females, and the innermost space around the hollow, is for children. It takes the birds only minutes to strip the body of all flesh (CE 45)

The Tower of Silence an “architectural wonder formed exclusively by the charitable Parsis to give food to God’s creatures” represents Parsi faith in the devotion for natural elements as well as their final act of charity. In the novel *Family Matters* the Tower of Silence which is surrounded by lush green trees gives Roxana a mystic calm: “How lush was the foliage of the trees and the shrubbery, she thought, such a different world, up here, on top of the hill. And such tranquility, high above the dust and stink of the city.” (FM 400). Yezad too finds the place enchanting and feels the embalming effect of spirituality on his vexed mind: “But Doongerwaadi is a magical place. It took away the pain and sadness, left peace in its stead. Almost like angels and fareshtas came down to comfort me.” (FM 409)

Zoroastrians rituals and prayers are solemnized in the presence of a fire, which is thoroughly tended with sandalwood and frankincense which is kept burning in a silver urn in the inner chamber of every Zoroastrian temple. Fire temple is also called a Darbe- Mehr (house of divine light).

Parsis are descended from the religious followers of Zoroastrianism who fled from Iran to avoid forced conversion to Islam. India offered them a safe heaven and Parsis also assimilated in this country. They adapted themselves to social, cultural and religious belief system of the Hindu and Muslim society.

Jesse S. Palsetia’s observations regarding the adaptability of Parsis are noteworthy in this regard:

The Parsis’ adoption and use of the languages of India was the most conspicuous example of their assimilation.[...] The Parsi also adapted many of the practices and tendencies favoured by the various Indian communities that surrounded them, as for example, the adoption of Indian dress norms, and the observance of many of the festivals and ceremonies of India. The Parsis also adapted to the rules of purity and common -sensitivity practiced in Indian setting. (13)

Perhaps it should be mentioned here that good thoughts, good words, good deeds must be vital to any religion. It is not something unique to the Parsis.

John R. Hinnells summarises the Zoroastrian teachings:

When men are judged at death, it is their thoughts, words and deeds that are weighed in the balance. Men's as well as women's own lives are the only basis on which they are judged. Unlike in Christianity, there is no idea of one man dying to save all or by salvation by faith (3)

Fire temples in India are of three grades, based mainly on the sanctity of the sacred fire. The highest is the Atash Behram fire collected from 16 different sources with about 15, 00 hours of consecration rituals. The second grade of fire is the Atash Adaran with fire collected from four different sources and is purified with consecration rituals lasting about 50 hours. The third grade of fire is Atash Dadgah, which is made from simple household fire, with consecration rituals lasting about five to 10 hours. Fire in Zoroastrianism is a representation of Ahura Mazda's purity of creation. Fire purifies everything. It also stands for the 'inner fire' or divine spark in a human being.

Now instead of getting in to the cartography of fire the point to note is that the fire is their commitment to the most primordial energy of the sun to make sense of this vast world. Psychologically speaking they want every Parsi to be a messenger of fire. So fire is the central core in Parsis belief system. There are 5 elements, earth air, water, fire and ether and the world is made up of these 5 elements together with consciousness. Fire is quick, spreads fast and so for Parsis it is interiorized far in their limbs, guts, in their viscera. In this context it should be pointed out that Jungians equate earth with sensation and perception. Water is associated with feeling of all sorts 'of densities, viscosities, but fire is associated with action. It is not surprising therefore that the Parsis are very active in every field. They have been the first to start schools, to start sciences, to start industries, to start engineering, to start chemicals, make ships etc. In India. Psychologically speaking the psychology of a person is predominant over fire. N.P. Sharma states:

Parsis have been in India now for more than one thousand years. To say that they have not assimilated themselves with the mainstream is readily and easily belied by appearances of things. They have repaid the cost of the home India gave them many times over, by playing very important roles in every crucial development of life. Politics (Dadabhai Naoroji and Sir Pherozesahw Mehta), Industry (Jamshedji Tata), Science (Homi Bhabha), Law (Nani A Palkhiwala) and music (Zubin Mehta). Their contribution in creative writing and education is no less. (11)

Dr. Jal Cowasji Paymaster is known to be a world famous cancer specialist. Dr. Rustom Jal Vakil was the first to treat high blood pressure with Rawolfia plant extract and bring the drug to the notice of the west. From this Rawolfia one gets Reserpine which is a very useful drug for hypertension. Dr. Vakil won the international Lasker award for his work. Dr. Noshir Antia is known as India's leading plastic surgeon. These are but a few names in the long list of Parsi doctors who were and are in the forefront of Indian medicine. The first Indian to carry out a western symphony orchestra is the great Maestro Zubin Mehta. For several years he conducted one of the world's greatest orchestras, the New York Philharmonica. Nani Palkhiwalla is India's leading constitutional lawyer who led the fight in opposition to the imposition of emergency rule and the delay of democracy in India during the time of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. He was India's ambassador to the United States after democracy was restored in India. Fardoonji Marazban started the first Gujarati press in 1812 from where he published the first Gujarati newspaper named as "The Bombay Samachar" which is still published.

So fire has become the call for them.

We are not talking of the Parsi fire in terms of cooking dals and vegetables, in terms of lighting the ageenthi or the fire place in the living room. Fire becomes their demi- god. They live in their fire and they die along with it. In no other religion has fire been sacralised that much. Hindus use the fire in their Hawans and homa ceremonies. Hindus have the god so-called Agni. But the relationship with the fire is for actual purification, but the relationship of Parsis with fire is ubiquitous.

They value, however all elements, earth, water, air, ether. Earth they consider sacred. So they don't bury their dead. They do not throw it in water because water gets polluted.

In religion they worship fire and when they bring that fire back to home, that becomes their cultural anthropology. And the fire burning... burning continuously for almost a hundred and fifty years, since this atash- bahram was built... the same fire his parents had gazed upon, and his grandparents, and great-grandparents. The thought filled his mind (Yezad) with quiet, with reassurance. (FM 341)

The Zoroastrian fire has to be sharply distinguished from hell fire which is that of sin and violence. We find example of that fire and its symbology in Milton's Paradise Lost. Zoroastrian fire is also different from carnal fire because this fire has been spiritualized through elaborate chants and mantras. This fire has sprung from sun which is worshipped by Zoroastrians; it is also different from the fire that Prometheus stole from the kitchen of Zeus. Zoroastrian fire is equated with their culture and civilization. This fire binds man to God. It binds one Parsi with another Parsi because they all worship this fire.

It's amazing the Parsis have held on to their culture enshrined in fire temple in their dress, in their marriages, customs, in their rituals despite persecution, despite diaspora. This way they remind us of the Tibetans in India who have held on to the culture. They also marry among themselves. They are close to the monasteries, their monks do not know Hindi but the Tibetans who are in trade and business know Hindi, but they have not adapted to Indian culture as such like Parsis who speak Gujarati, Hindi and English and hold jobs in the private and Government sectors.

Culturally Parsis wear a long shirt called sadre, the front of the shirt is associated with goodness. The back of the shirt is associated with badness. Near the neck of the shirt there is a pocket in which Parsis deposit their good deeds to remind them of their commitments to goodness. In addition to sadre every Parsi wears kusti which is 9ft long and is tied around the waist. The upper portion of the body constitutes goodness and the lower portion constitutes badness. Every Parsi wears these two garments in addition to the regular clothes over them. The fact that he wears this sadre and kusti shows that he is constantly aware of good and bad, and that he is consciously choosing to stay on the side of goodness.

The dress of Parsis gives them a unique presence. They can be easily recognized in the crowd. Bapsi Sidhwa notes in her novel *The Crow Eaters* about a group of Parsis on a railway platform:

The Parsi women [...] tied their heavy silk saris differently, with a triangular piece in front displaying broad, exquisitely embroidered borders. The knotted tassels of their kustis dangled as if pyjama strings were tied at the back, and white mathabanas peeked primally from beneath sari covered heads. The men wore crisp pyjamas,

flowing white coats fastened with neat little bows, and flat turbans. They looked quite distinctive. (CE 56)

CONCLUSION

Mistry being a Parsi himself is very much aware of his Parsi religion and identity and thus the characters he portrayed in his fiction are truly Parsis. In Zoroastrianism the sun together with the primordial fire is placed in the centre core of the Zoroastrianism psyche. This placement as has been argued in the course of the psycho-social application to the themes and the characters heightens the power of Will. So this Will is the driving force in the success and struggle syndromes in the Parsi psyche.

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