

Rohinton Mistry's *Such a Long Journey* : Misery of an Urban Outcaste

Mr. Robert Parmar

Assistant Professor,

Department of Humanities and Social Sciences

Indukaka Ipcowala Institute of Management Studies (IIM)

CHARUSAT, Changa

The Post-Independence Indian Parsi writing in English is likely heavily influenced by ethnocentrism and the ensuing propensity to give voice to the community's peripheral members. As a result, their writings can be considered examples of minority discourse in Indian literature. Parsi fictional works in general and Rohinton Mistry's works in particular convey the suffering of a cultural outsider faced by Parsis in India as a discourse from the boundaries of a broad spectrum of Indian culture. However, it should be highlighted that the socio-cultural context in which Mistry's Parsi characters inhabit may not be the one that exists at the moment, particularly in the context of current globalisation, but rather it is the one that existed at certain significant turning points in the history of the nation that made it impossible for Parsis to live comfortably in Bombay. In actuality, Gustard Noble and other Parsi heroes in Mistry's expression of the agony of a cultural outsider stem mostly from insecurity and the worry of perhaps assimilating into the majority society. Additionally, factors like the neighborhood's dwindling population, late marriages, urban frenzy, high divorce rate, etc. are determined to be disturbing the community as a whole. It is also possible to view the peculiar characteristics Parsi characters exhibit in works by Parsi authors as being representative of what Dharan terms "ethnic atrophy syndrome" (7). Thus, the community as a whole serves as the main character in the majority of Parsi works.

Minority discourses as a whole challenge the formalist framework of language and literature that permeates popular fiction by especially illustrating the growing pains that a community experiences as it prepares for the future. According to Edward Said, writers from ethnic minorities were the ones to break language's formalist structure because their personal history as a minority "opens literatures to the claims of raw testimony" that "cannot be dismissed as unimportant" (XXII). This is true of the 1990 novels *Trying to Grow* by Firdaus Kanga, *Bombay Duck* by Farukh Dhondy, *The Crow Eaters* by Bapsi Sidhwa, and *Tales from Firozsha Baag* by Rohinton Mistry. *Family Matters* (1977), *Such a Long Journey* (1991), *A Fine Balance* (1996), and (2002). All of these Parsi authors reflected their community's values in their writings.

A very small ethnic and religious group in India, the Parsis are concentrated along the west coast, particularly in Bombay. Despite being a minority, Parsis have played a significant role in India's social, cultural, political, and economic history. The term "Parsis" or "Parsees"¹ relates to one of their ancestral homes, the Persian province of "Fars," which they fled around 1200 years ago to avoid Arab invasion persecution and prevent the islamization of Zoroastrian beliefs (Kulke 13). The period of Persian history that is still significant for modern-day Parsees begins in the sixth century B.C. and concludes with the Muslim invasion of Persia in the eighth century A.D., according to Kulke. seventh century AD (13). The emergence of two figures, Cyrus and Zoroaster, who later played major roles in the political and theological development of ancient Persia, marks the beginning of this epoch. "With

these two names, Iran enters a time of history marked by an unparalleled intellectual upheaval in Greece, Israel, India, and China" (Kulke 14).

Iran is situated physically between two poles that are diametrically opposed to one another: the sparsely inhabited Turanian steppes of central Asia and the ancient Mesopotamian high cultures of Sumeria, Elam, Babylonia, and Assyria. Cyrus and Zoroaster stand in for these opposing political and cultural polarities. The teachings of Zoroaster were developed in the east in direct conflict with the nomadic culture at the cusp of myth and history, whereas the Persian polity began in western Iran under the Archaemenidian Cyrus. The two fundamental tenets of Iranian history are represented by the dichotomy: the need to build a global political order and Ahura Mazda's heavenly mission (Kulke 14).

Regarding the precise historical emergence of Zoroaster, historians hold varying perspectives. Zoroaster lived and taught between 4000 and 6000 BC, according to Greek historiographers and modern-day Parsees in India, but western Iranists date Zoroaster's activity primarily in the fifth and sixth centuries BC (Kulke 14-5). The ethical struggle against various false gods and for the "transcendence of one god against the demons that do not exist" are the foundations of Zoroaster's brilliance (Kulke 15). Zoroaster ignored the ritualistic aspects of worshipping God, focusing instead on human behaviour and moral motivations (Kulke 15) The Zoroastrian faith is monotheistic in its purest form. Zoroaster declared Ahura Mazda (Wise Lord) to be the one all-powerful, immortal God, in opposition to innumerable gods and demons of his time.

On the day of the final judgement, Ahura Mazda serves as both creator and judge. The beneficent spirits (Spenta Mainyu) he established control this planet as Ahura Mazda, the highest supreme lord of eternity. The wicked spirits in this realm resist these Spenta Mainyu as the force of good and light (Angra Mainyu)... This universe is a battleground between good and evil because of the conflict between two antipodes. At the end of time, the good will undoubtedly demonstrate its superiority, but it will only be able to do so with the full mobilisation of all the forces of this earth. In this fight, it is imperative that each individual human stand up for himself. will for the good and to defend actively. Should he fail to side with the good he will have to share the fate of the evil (Kulke 19).

The Avesta is the Parsi people's sacred text. It is important to Zoroaster's religion. The Avesta was first recorded during the Arsacid era and is credited to Zoroaster. It was originally intended to include twenty-one novels, but there are currently just four. According to Zoroaster, man can only find redemption via his actions and not so much through atonement and prayer (Kulke, 19). The purifying rituals are the most significant Parsi rites. Zoroaster commanded his disciples to take extreme care to prevent pollution of the body and the natural elements, particularly through dead materials. This clarifies the purpose of the Tower of Silence (Dakhmas), where the dead Zoroastrians are deposited for the vultures to consume since else soil, fire, or water... would be defiled by them" (Kulke 19). If a person has come into contact with a dead body or something impure, thorough and extremely complicated purification ceremonies must be performed, according to Zoroastrian theology. The most significant of these rites, Bareshnum, lasts nine nights (Modi 137). In the Zoroastrian religion, fire is crucial because "no ceremony can take place without fire being present" (Kulke 20). Ahura Mazda, the s For the first time in history, Zoroastrianism became the official religion of Persia during the Sassanid era (226–651 AD). When Iran was conquered by Islamic Arabians in the seventh century, the Iranian-Zoroastrian empire came to an end, and the Parsees were forced to flee. The Persians who immigrated to India after Persia was conquered by the Arabians are the ancestors of the Parsees who currently reside in India. On the precise date that

Parsee immigrants began arriving in India, historians disagree. "However, these immigrants were not the first Persians to set foot in India. The northern India has previously been impacted by the pre-Islamic Persian Empires" (Kulke 23) source of light and truth, is represented as fire (Kulke 20). The chronicle "Kissah-i-Sanjan," written by the Parsee priest Behaman Kaikobad Sanjana in Nausari, serves as the foundation for the majority of prevalent theories about the circumstances and stages of the migrations of Parsee from Persia. Although historians disagree over whether or not its contents are reliable.

According to the Kissah-i-Sanjan, the ancestors of the Indian Parsees initially fled to isolated parts of Khurasan, from where they moved to Hormuz in the Persian Gulf 100 years after the fall of the Sassanian Empire. They resided there for 15 years before departing on seven ships by sea towards India. They arrived at Diu (Gujarat) and after another 19 years were given asylum by a Hindu Raja named Jadi Rana in Sanjan, where they temporarily stayed (Cited from different sources in Kulke 26).

Jadi Rana, the king of Sanjan, permitted Parsees to settle there but placed restrictions on them, including that they explain their religion to the king, give up their native Persian language, learn Indian languages, have their women wear Indian traditional attire, put down their weapons, and only hold wedding processions at night (Kulke 28). The first few of these requirements were met by the Parsees. Both the community's native tongue, Gujarati, and the sari, the traditional dress of Parsee women, became Gujarati. The Parsees nevertheless "Clothed their cultural compromises to their Indian surroundings" (Kulke 29). In Gujarat, the Parsees started to settle in different regions around the end of 10th century. Later they moved to the other parts of the country especially, Bombay.

The community has faced threats of purging and severe subjugation from some members of the dominant community on numerous occasions throughout history. The fundamental theme of Parsi writings in India is the community's fears amid such crises. If a minority ethnic group, Parsis keenly followed the complicated political events that followed India's independence and, as needed, responded to social and political concerns like the partition, the emergency, and so forth by offering a Parsi point of view. For instance, Bapsi Sidhwa depicts a Parsi perspective on the partition in her book *The Ice-Candy Man* through the story of a Parsi girl named Lenny. Such a *Long Journey and A Fine Balance* by Rohinton Mistry concentrate on some of the contentious political events such as the 'State of Internal Emergency' that rocked India during the Indira Gandhi regime of the 1970s. *A Fine Balance* also depicts the rioting between Hindus and Muslims that took place after the partition. Most notably, their novels tried to highlight the plight of minorities in India by viewing sociopolitical changes from a minority perspective. In general, Parsi writing is motivated by a concern for the underrepresented. For instance, Mistry's works not only depict the Parsi community's troubled life in India (particularly in Bombay), but also portray the struggles of other oppressed groups. In *A Fine Balance* (1996), the attack on innocent Muslims by fundamentalist Hindus during the post-partition riots is depicted, as is the story of Hussain Miyan, a Muslim whose family members were burned to death by the extremist Shiv Sena activists during the post-Babri Masjid demolition riots in Bombay. These stories of the Chamnar caste, an untouchable community of tanners and leather workers who are brutally subject But through time, the Parsees developed a distinctive willingness to understand and adapt to the shifting reality. Some of them become violent due to the host cultures' persistent aggressiveness. compromise their morals and beliefs. In some of their writings, there were instances that called into doubt the community's ethnic purity. For instance, despite Muslims being the stereotypical adversaries of the Parsis, Brit's family approves her sister's engagement to Salim in Firdaus Kanga's 1990 novel *Trying to Grow* (Singh 30).

In Mistry's *Such a Long Journey*, a pious Parsi residing in Bombay named Gustard Noble provides a unique perspective on India in the 1970s. The novel illustrates the plight of Parsis in contemporary India who suffer from being an ethnic minority and feeling like a cultural outsider. The 1971 Indo-Pak conflict serves as the backdrop for the book. Gustard Noble, the book's protagonist, faces significant obstacles, much like Salem Sinai did in Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, as India went through a period of political and social unrest in the 1970s under Indira Gandhi. The book is set in Bombay, where it shares a setting with most of the stories in its predecessor, *Tales from Firozsha Baag* (1977). Khodadad Building, mostly inhabited by middle class Parsis.

A bank employee is Gustard Noble. Through a sequence of unfavourable events, his commitment to his family, his belief in Zoroastrianism, and his affection for his friends and his community are continuously put to the test. The two main contrasting patterns in his life are loyalty and travel: the first calls for consistency and commitment, the second for mutations and metamorphosis (Malak 108). Gustard's miserable situation makes the readers feel sorry for him since the experiences, anxieties, traumas, and frustrations he goes through are those of a minority community, and more broadly, of all ethnic minority populations. His aspirations are dimmed by problems that keep cropping up, leaving him upset and powerless. He exhibits an odd concern that others are constantly out to get him and his group, which seems to be unfounded symptomatic of syndrome. He is wary of India's complicated political system, and the anti-minority sentiment of some members of the majority society makes him worry about an approaching, terrible ethnic cleansing that will affect his community.

Major Bilimoria's disappearance from the Khodadad building struck Gustard first. Gustard thought of Bilimoria as "a second father" to his children because he had been a devoted brother to him (14). His first son Sohrab's unwillingness to enrol in the IIT despite being highly qualified and scoring well on the admission exam, as well as his rude behaviour at Roshan's birthday celebration, all of which led to Sohrab deserting his family, dealt a second severe blow to his already troubled head. The complex series of events that followed Gustard receiving a package from Major Bilimoria containing ten lakh rupees; the illness and eventual demise of his close friend Dinshawji; Roshan's exhausting diarrhoea; the passing of Tehmul Lungraa, a juvenile criminal inmate of Khodadad building and the destruction of Gustard's sacred wall by the city authorities - all these and more conspired against the normal course of events in Gustard's life.

However, Major Bilimoria's disappearance and the parcel he had sent generated a great deal of chaos in Gustard's little world. Gustard felt as though he was being held captive by various types of traitors since Bilimoria's arrest on allegations of impersonating the prime minister over the phone and receiving a substantial sum of money—to the tune of 10 lakh rupees—had been a part of a significant political scheme. Both physical and mental anguish were part of his journey, which resembled an epic fight. Despite having to say goodbye to some of his closest friends, Gustard's eventual escape from time and circumstance as the representative of an ethnic minority culminated in a sense of reconciliation. His survival served as an inspiration for all minority fights.

Gustard was upset on multiple levels in the midst of his personal troubles and worries when he considered the situation of minorities in India. He was a responsible Parsi who understood the grim future minorities in India, and Parsis in particular, faced. He saw the Shiv Sena as the height of violence committed by the majority against minorities. Once his son Sohrab reportedly declined to enrol in IIT "To what type of life can Sohrab look forward? With Shiv Sena politics that are fascist and Maharashtrian language nonsense, minorities have no future. It would be comparable to American black people getting half as much yet being twice as good as white guys " (55).

Malcom, a friend of Gustard's, frequently emphasised to him that "we are minority in a nation of Hindus" (23). And despite the fact that the minority eat cows, the Hindu religion's sacred animal, which is considered to be a source of protein, he claims that Hindus are entirely responsible for the existence of minorities. In Gustard's opinion, the terror psychosis that developed as a result of the escalating sectarianism and Hindu fundamentalism in the 1970s is quite prominent. He believed that the surroundings were so unfriendly as to hurt him. Gustard holds fast to his identity and his faith in the face of all the pressure from the outside world. He firmly felt that "all religions were equal... yet one had to be true to one's own" and that "religions were not like garment styles that could be altered at whim or to follow fashion" (24). Gustard defended his faith against scepticism that pervaded India over its rituals and practises, such as the role of the Tower of Silence, where the corpses of Zoroastrians are deposited for the vultures to eat. Unwaveringly, he "loved the serene mystery and undivided tranquillity that ruled in the fire temple" (24). Gustard believed that his religion had a stronger case than both Islam and Christianity. Malcom used to make fun of him frequently by asserting that Parsis fled from Persia to India as Muslims advanced, and that Christianity arrived there first. However, Gustard was never willing to accept any downplaying of the significance of his religion. "We had a prophet named Zarathustra who lived more than 1500 years before your son of God, 1,000 years before Buddha, and 200 years before Moses. And are you aware of the extent to which Zoroastrianism affected Islam, Christianity, and Judaism?" (24).

Gustard named the authoritarian politics and anti-minority policies of the Shiv Sena and Indira Gandhi as the two greatest concerns facing his group. Gustard found the Shiv Sena's assault on minorities to be arguably the most alarming issue. Goons could be heard yelling, "Parsi cow-eaters, we'll show you who the boss is" (39). Gustard and his friend Dinshawji disliked Indira Gandhi primarily because she nationalised banks, which hurt the Parsi community's grip on the banking sector. In Dinshawji's memory, "The respect we received back then was due to the fact that Parsis were the monarchs of finance. The atmosphere has now been damaged throughout. Since nationalising banks under Indira, " (38). In addition, they disapproved of Indira Gandhi's backing for a separate Maharashtra. The Congress as well as the Shiv Sena, therefore, were troublemakers as far as Parsis were concerned: Recall the time when her dog, Nehru, served as Prime Minister and appointed her as the Congress Party's president. She immediately started supporting the calls for a separate Maharashtra. How much rioting and blood was shed as a result of her. Additionally, the Shiv Sena is still around today, ready to treat the rest of us like second-class citizens. Remember that Hillary began it all by endorsing the a**holes who were racist? (39).

The accounts of the political unrest and the minorities' subsequent subjugation that are mentioned in the book go beyond the confines of its pure fiction. Instead, as Mistry is writing from the perspective of an ethnic minority, it is best to think of these stories as the consequence of the author's involvement and interest in the country's post-independence socio-political environment. Mistry predicted the rise of extremist groups that fight India's society's cultural diversity. He was aware of the imminent dangers that racist extremist groups like the Shiv Sena offer to the multicultural and multiethnic nature of Indian society, as well as the pervasive racism and other issues. The majority's threat of violence creates a persistent anxiety in Gustard's mind that eventually makes him a paranoid. Gustard's rhetorical barrage of hate also included the Shiv Sena. He refers to the Shiv Sena leader as a Hitler and Mussolini worshipper (73). According to him, the Shiv Sena knows how to hold rallies in Shivaji Park where they yell slogans, make threats, and rename roads. Shiv Sena once employed Tehmul Lungraa to hand out anti-minority literature in Bombay (89). Shiv Sena members patrolled the city streets during the Indo-Pak conflict while Bombay was blacked out at night due to Pakistani air attacks, throwing stones at windows, beating up their opponents, and stealing homes (298).

Gustard, a representative of India's minorities, harshly criticises the rule under Indira. The majority of the episodes Mistry describes in the book are made-up versions of actual events that took place during Indira Gandhi's tenure. Gustard has two reasons for disliking Indira Gandhi. First, as I already indicated, her policies, including nationalising banks. Second, and more significantly, the Bilimoria-related incidents in which Indira Gandhi participated. In actuality, Major Bilimoria fell victim to political swindlers in a deceptive political plot that the Prime Minister herself was intimately involved in. Bilimoria called Gustard to Delhi to inform him what had transpired after being detained, imprisoned, and subjected to torture. By pretending to be the prime minister over the phone, Indira Gandhi ordered Bilimoria to urgently obtain sixty lakh rupees from the SBI director in order to fund guerilla (Mukti Bahini) training. Additionally, Major Bilimoria was requested to write a confession, which he did without hesitation. The PM's office stole the money before it could be used for its intended purposes. Bilimoria kept 10 lakh rupees for his pals after realising this. He had sent Gustard this cash to be deposited in a bank in Bombay. However, as things continued, Bilimoria was detained, arrested, and subjected to cruel torture until he paid the money.

The Nagarwala case, which was the top story in all the major Indian media during the winter of 1971, served as the basis for the Major Bilimoria case described by Mistry. The similarity between the two situations is that Parsi people were involved in both. According to the papers, "the head cashier of SBI in Delhi had paid Mr. Nagarwala six million rupees based on a phone call from Mrs. Gandhi" (Quoted in Mukherjee 83). Mrs. Gandhi "had begged him to accept this huge danger in the name of Mother India," according to Nagarwala. The head clerk was suspended after delivering the cash to Mr. Nagarwala in a predetermined location and having second thoughts about it. Mrs. Gandhi categorically denied making any such phone call. After a few of days, Nagarwala was apprehended and admitted to imitating Mrs. Gandhi's voice (Mukherjee 83). Because Nagarwala was a Parsi, Mistry retells the tale of Nagarwala from the perspective of a group that has historically been marginalised. "Like many other versions of the story, Mistry deems Mrs. Gandhi to be culpable. He presents the story from the viewpoint of Nagarwala, who plays Major Bilimoria in the play. He embeds him in a Bombay neighbourhood and conjures up a story that is both fact and fiction. 84 Mukherjee).

In *Such a Long Journey*, the political environment of the 1971 conflict between India and Pakistan is critically examined. When the author discusses the war, he explicitly names the voices of opposition. Triadic sirens had been blaring every morning at ten o'clock in anticipation of the war: a thorough three minute warning, followed by the monotonous all clear (143). The lights were off in every home. Gustard began taping papers to the windows even before the 1967 Indo-China War. He contends that wars have evolved into an irregular political ritual that isolates people and keeps them cooped up in darkened homes. The interest in the sociopolitical contexts in which minority discourse and subaltern writing, whether fiction or non-fiction, is generated and situated, is a significant issue. Therefore, as I've said before, subaltern literature is not a formalist endeavour intended to produce simply aesthetic expressions devoid of reality. However, the bourgeois majoritarian culture and its discourses, in which literature is separated from the social, include an interest in the formal aspects of literature. Presentations of the idealised Indian self, which is described in terms of what Romila Thapar called "Syndicated Hinduism," were the dominating form of expression in India (Quoted in Ahmed 15-6). By developing his story from a subaltern viewpoint, Mistry provides a counter narrative that challenges the predominant tendency of weaving narratives around the idealised Indian Hindu self.

As an Indian citizen of Parsi ancestry who is juggling numerous subject roles, Mistry depicts the suffering of a cultural outsider throughout the entire book. Gustard lived in a world that was rife

with oppression, ugly, and hypocrisy. He is further caught between several subject positions as a result of this. Absolute clarity and reality-resemblance are used to illustrate social ills and the human condition:

The society shown is totally devoid of resiliency. Mistry becomes a realist who feels compelled to expose the world around him as a result of his horror at the sight of the revolting state of humanity and the pervasive corruption. He sometimes has the appearance of a nationalist reporting on the state of the world's people. Wars between nations, a complete lack of commitment from major powers, and other factors highlight the deteriorating political environment in world politics. (Meitei; Dhawan and Writing from the margins and speaking for the underclass, Mistry tries to avoid the temptation to follow the conventions of the national literatures, whose tenets and contours, as Aijas Ahmed noted elsewhere, were developed by the European bourgeoisie during the time of their hegemony over class and colonial expansion (15). Therefore, what we see in the overall structure of the mainstream Indian litera The idea of canonicity coupled with the bourgeois, upper caste dominance of the nation state; the idea of classicism that is partially brahminical and partially imported from Europe; the ongoing engulfment of literary expressions and cultures by print capitalism; accommodation with regional languages but preoccupations with creating a supra-linguistic Indian literature based on an idealised Indian self. ... Textual approach toward lived histories; literary history concepts that are so commonplace they aren't even formally bourgeois. (Ahmed 15-6).ture is an unfinished bourgeois endeavour that came to the following conclusions:Noble 112).

The idea of canonicity coupled with the bourgeois, upper caste dominance of the nation state; the idea of classicism that is partially brahminical and partially imported from Europe; the ongoing engulfment of literary expressions and cultures by print capitalism; accommodation with regional languages but preoccupations with creating a supra-linguistic Indian literature based on an idealised Indian self. ... Textual approach toward lived histories; literary history concepts that are so commonplace they aren't even formally bourgeois. (Ahmed 15-6).

In the narrative, the suffering of the subaltern as a cultural outsider has spiritual ramifications. Gustard seems to pass a spiritual test as evidenced by the growing pains he endures as a result of being cast to the periphery amid difficult circumstances. The goal of Gustard's search is peace and reconciliation. He takes down the dark sheets covering his windows to let some light into his chamber. As an outsider, he felt as though his anguish was temporarily resolved even though there is no permanent cure for agony. He demonstrates how a person can survive in any adverse situation by maintaining moral character and adopting ethical behaviour as prescribed by his own religion. Other than joining his own ethnic group, he had nowhere else to travel. Gustard's spiritual consolation comes from the ethnicity of his origin, in the peaceful mystery of his community, was perhaps the force that drives not only his life, but also the lives of all ethnic minorities, who happened to live in a society mostly eclipsed by the dominant interests of a dominant community.

Works Cited:

- Ahmed, Aijas. In *Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992.
- Dharan, N.S. "Ethnic Atrophy Syndrome in Rohinton Mistry's *Such a Long Journey*" *The Toronto Review of Contemporary Writing Abroad* vol. 14, No.1, Summer 1995. 6-14. Print.

- Jameson, Fredric. "Third world Literature in the Era of Multinational Capital", Social Text. Fall, 1986. 65-8. Print.
- Malak. Amin. "The Shahrazadic Tradition: Rohinton Mistry's Such a Long Journey and the Art of Storytelling" The Journal of Commonwealth Literature Vol. 28, No.2, 1993. 108-118. Print.
- Meitei, M.Mani "Rohinton Mistry's Such a Long Journey and its Critical Realism". Fiction of the Nineties. Eds. Dass Veena Noble and R.K. Dhawan. New Delhi: Prestige Books, 1994. 102-113. Print.

Mistry, Rohinton. A Fine Balance London: Faber and Faber, 1996. Print.

---. Such a Long Journey. London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1991. Print

