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ETHNIC ANXIETY AND MENACE IN THE PARSIS: A CRITICAL STUDY OF ROHINTON MISTRY'S *FAMILY MATTERS* AND *SUCH A LONG JOURNEY*

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ABSTRACT

This research paper represents Parsis and their anxieties and insecurity in their new homeland, India. Rohinton Mistry has portrayed the Parsi community as a minority striving to preserve their religion and culture in the dominant Hindu society. Even after migrating to Canada, Mistry still writes about the status of his community in India. He has minutely displayed the sufferings of the minority communities in the backdrop of Post-Independence India. He underscores the effect of significant events, such as the Emergency, on the minority communities in Indian society. This research investigates the issue of insecurity and threat by critically studying Mistry's *Family Matters*.

Keywords: Minority, Insecurity, Anxiety, Parsi, Community

Introduction

Rohinton Mistry is a prominent Parsi-English writer who has portrayed his community's religion and culture. He raises his voice against the exploitation and problems of the minorities. This paper tries to study the minority, especially the Parsis, critically. The article also focuses on the decreasing number of the Parsis. Race and ethnicity are essential facets of the cultural structure of a specific area. The clash between the dominant and the minority groups leads to unrest in the society. This cultural crisis should be resolved by fighting hatred and inculcating tolerance towards other religions. Literature is a solid tool to change a nation's social, political and cultural circumstances. Mistry also plays a vital role in creating a world free of dominance and hierarchy based on the principle of equality.

The religious diversity in India often leads to cultural anarchy in the Indian society. The dominant

group takes advantage of the minority group, and it becomes the responsibility of the writers to raise the voices of the minority group. Ethnic identity has become a significant issue in a multicultural nation, and Mistry has rightly highlighted the marginalisation of the Parsi community. His works have displayed Parsi sensibility rooted in his community's culture.

Issues of Parsis in Present Times:

Today, in the twenty-first century, minority communities suffer from a sense of anxiety, insecurity and threat owing to the communal tensions in the country. There is a shift in the approach of India from egalitarianism to majoritarianism, leading to unrest and anarchy in the society. Though India is a secular state, all the national attention is focused on the affairs of the minorities. The Hindus consider other religions trivial, and the political leaders make their ends by developing anarchy. The Hindu right wing, like Bajrang Dal, takes initiatives to convert Christians,

Parsis and Muslims to Hindu. One of the most burning issues is that the populace of the Parsis is decreasing rapidly. Like all the Parsi writers, Mistry has underscored this issue in his works. His works do not criticise any specific religion but represent some historical episodes in India that force the minority communities to suffer from insecurity and threats in the dominant Hindu culture.

Mistry's Concern for His Community:

The Parsi writers have highlighted the approach of the dominant group to their community. The Parsis have migrated to different countries such as Britain, America and Canada, and Mistry also depicts the interaction of the Parsis with the other people of these countries. Migration is an essential subject in *Family Matters*. Parsis in India go abroad in search of money. Narendra Kumar states:

Parsis are the best choice since providing unlimited possibilities for growth and prosperity. Disorganisation is part of the Parsi psyche. Exiled twelve hundred years ago, he came to India. Now, they are migrating west in search of greener pastures. Thus, in Parse's case, there is a "double migration (14).

Nilufer Bharucha considers Post-colonial Parsi writings ethnocentric and states, "The Parsis are the single largest group of ethno-religious/ minority discourse practitioners amongst Indian English writers". (203) Their literature is depicted by ethnocentric and minority discourses, representing all the issues of modern Parsis who suffer from ethnic anxieties. The Parsi community is threatened to be merged into the dominant Hindu culture, leading to an identity crisis. There are numerous issues, such as low birth rate, late marriages, declining populace, approach to girl child, high rate of divorce, and a sense of alienation, which Mistry has dealt with in his works.

All the Parsi writers such as Rohinton Mistry, Firdaus Kanga, Cyrus Mistry, Boman Desai, Farrukh Dhondy, Dina Mehta, Bapsi Sidhwa and many more are trying to preserve their ethnic identity. They all know the Parsi community's hopes, failures, ambitions, frustrations, and struggles to create an ethnic identity. A.K. Singh has rightly pointed out,

"Their work exhibit consciousness of their community in such a way that the community emerges as a protagonist from their work though on the surface these work deal with their human protagonists" (66).

Though the Parsis are an ethno-religious minority in Indian society, their contribution to politics, science, sports, literature and business has been noteworthy. The Parsis are the followers of Zoroastrianism and are primarily settled in Gujarat and Mumbai in India after the Muslims forced them to leave their homeland. Mistry often deals with the day-to-day lives of the people who experience communal disharmony, caste discrimination, and issues of religious and cultural diversities. Mistry's novels depict the socio-political concerns of the nation from the 1960s to the 1990s. Mistry strives hard to foreground his ethnic identity and Parsi culture, which the dominant Hindu ideologies suppress. Mistry highlights the humiliation and exploitation of the Parsis at the hands of the dominant group's political leaders and religious preachers. Mistry has vividly portrayed this domination of Hindu cultural ideologies against the backdrop of historical events such as the Emergency, the Assassination of Indira Gandhi, the Indo-Pak War and many more.

The Parsis in the Novel *Family Matters*:

In the novel *Family Matters*, Mistry has underscored the issues of Parsis and other minorities in the dominant Hindu society. The text highlights the issues of corruption and communalism in the backdrop of the Emergency and the demolition of the Babri Mosque. The story deals with a single family living in Bombay who experiences brutal social circumstances. Mistry also locates two examples in the novel when Nariman Vakeel, the story's central character, falls in love with a Christian girl named Lucy. Nevertheless, his parents and society strongly opposed this association. Despite being a highly educated English literature professor with a moral duty to inculcate ethnic values in the students, Nariman was forced to separate from Lucy and marry a Parsi widow with two children. His loyalty to his family and community prevented him from choosing his life partner. Secondly, towards the end of the novel *Family Matters*, Murad's father, Yezad, is

hugely saddened when he finds Murad in an intimate position with a non-Parsi girl. It was like he was reading the notice of the Parsi communities of Bombay. He scolds and notifies Murad, "Because we are a pure Persian race, a unique contribution to this planet and mixed marriages will destroy that" (Mistry 469). Mistry tried to emphasise that the Parsis could not afford to lose their racial purity at any cost. The people who perform intermarriages receive the punishment of ex-communication. This resistance of the Parsis to inter-religious marriages has resulted in a rapid decrease in their population. A.K Singh has praised the depiction of this issue:

Rohinton Mistry has demonstrated immense ability in responding to the threats to the Parsi family, community, and the country. He narrates his community through the different narratives of his characters, who invariably express their concern for their community and the changes that will affect them and themselves. Their fate is bound up with the fate of their community. By centralising their community in their narratives, they centralise and, preserve and protect themselves and thus use it as a psychological crutch (29).

The story is full of Parsiness as the family displays themes of lost love, rituals and customs, declining populace and late marriages in the backdrop of Emergency. Mistry is well aware of their community's deteriorating populace worldwide. Various studies reveal that the Parsi community is one of India's smallest communities, and the rapid decrease in their populace can cause the extinction of Zoroastrianism. The Parsi Inspector Masalavala also exhibits the danger of extinction: "The experts in demographics are confident that fifty years hence, there will be no Parsis left" (Mistry 412). Dr Fitter replies to this common fear of the Parsi community: "Extinct like dinosaurs. They will have to study our bones that are all" (Mistry 412). Both these statements display the grief of the Parsis, who played a vital role in prospering Bombay, and now "it will be a loss to the whole world. When a culture vanishes, humanity is the loser" (Mistry 415). Inspector Masalawala blames Parsi girls and boys for decreasing numbers of their community:

Take the falling birth rate. Our Parsi boys and girls don't want to get married unless they have their flat. Which is next to impossible in Bombay, right? They don't want to sleep under the same roof as their mummy and daddy. Meanwhile, the other communities are doing it in the same room, never mind the same roof, separated by a plywood partition or a torn curtain. Our little lords and ladies want soundproofing and privacy. These Western ideas are harmful. (Mistry 346)

Family Matters revolves around the life of Nariman Vakeel, a retired university Professor who lives in a beautiful apartment with his two middle-aged step-children, Jal and Komi. Nariman's elder daughter, Roxana, lives with her spouse, Yezad, with their children Murad and Jahangir. Yezad suffers from a financial crisis and is unhappy to look after her father-in-law. Mistry has depicted a person's sufferings in his old age, and even at Roxana's house, her father finds no care and peace as he is continuously humiliated by Yazad. As the story progresses towards the end, Nariman and Coomy have died, and the Chinoy family has shifted to Jal. Yezad has become a religious fanatic and questions Murad's devotion to Zoroastrianism. The story ends with a message that Jehangir must learn to negotiate his wishes, his family's responsibility and his individual choices.

Mistry has set the novel amid socio-political concerns in the 1990s. There is an episode in the book when Coomy disagrees with Nariman Vakeel, who tries to convince Coomy to go for a morning walk as the Hindu mobs burn down a Parsi couple under a false impression. She further asserts, "How often does a mosque in Ayodhya turn people into savages in Bombay? Once in a blue moon" (Mistry 5). The author also represents Shiv Sena as a Hindu right-wing who loots and exploits people experiencing poverty. The destruction of the Babri mosque is an incident which deeply hurt the secular stand of India. The part of government agencies in developing a sense of hatred among different communities is questionable, and Mistry has displayed the anxieties of the Parsis artistically. The approach of the Bombay police has also been questioned, as it completely

supported the community involved in violence. In the novel *Family Matters*, Hussain explains how his family was burnt alive before his eyes:

The police were behaving like gangsters. In Muslim Mohallas, they were shooting their guns at innocent people. Houses were burning, and neighbours came out to throw water. And the police? Firing bullets like target practice. These guardians of the law were murdering everybody! And my poor wife and children...I couldn't even recognise them. (Mistry 148)

These episodes ruined India's multicultural, peaceful atmosphere and led to a sense of insecurity among the minorities. Yezad also comments on the approach of Shiv Sena, "South Indians are anti-Bombay, Valentine's Day is anti-Hindustani, Film stars born before 1947 in the Pakistani part of Punjab are traitors to the country" (Mistry 32).

Identity Crisis in *Such a Long Journey*:

Mistry's *Such a Long Journey* is written with post-colonial components to offer significance to the identity of persons in their living circumstances. The novel depicts a psychological state powerfully and expresses the feelings of the Parsi community, which tries to establish its ethnic identity in India. After India's independence, the Parsis started to doubt their future and felt that having an acceptable position in Indian society would become impractical. It made them conscious of their current condition, and they started to migrate to foreign lands. This novel represents the Parsis' psychological state in Mumbai; they feel they will experience displacement and oppression in their new homeland. In the past, they have been conquered by the colonisers, and currently, they are controlled by India's political leaders. The Parsi community suffers from alienation in Indian Hindu Society. Although the Parsis reside in India, they are not considered natives of India even after being in India since the ninth century.

Mistry revolves the novel around Gustad's life, and the entire story focuses on his Parsi family. The book is entirely based on the search of the whole Parsi community for a new identity through middle-class Parsi families residing in Khodadar Bhavan. The

author expresses the misfortune of the Parsi community and its identity losses through the story's leading characters. The novel details the Parsis and other marginalised people who long for a better life. The craving for the identity of the Parsis comes from the words of Parsi characters like Gustad and Dinshaji, who raise their voice to create the identity of the Parsis. They also reveal the pathetic day-to-day lives of the Parsis in North India. Thus, *Such A Long Journey* depicts the identity crisis of the Parsi community and displays Mistry's longing to develop an ethnic identity in India.

Mistry tries to record the restlessness, concerns, difficulties and distinct identities of a Parsi community within India's geographical boundaries, and he strives hard to preserve the Parsi ethnic identity of his community in his writings. In the novel *Such A Long Journey*, Mistry represents the Parsi community to reveal how the colonies' status affects the community's ethnic identity. The story also highlights that historical awareness also shapes the collective ethnic identity of the Parsi community. Gustad, in the book *Such a Long Journey*, explains the sense of fear and anxiety in the following manner:

No future for minorities, with all these fascist Shiv Sena politics and Marathi language nonsense. It was going to be like the black people in America-twice as good as the white man to get half as much. How could he make Sohrab understand this? (Mistry 55).

The inappropriate actions of Shiv Sena and Bajrang Dal forced Gustad to develop a mental state that minorities like the blacks in America are no longer safe in India. The various actions of Shiv Sena exhibit that this organisation tries its best to exploit minority groups such as Parsis and make a profit out of everything. In the novel *Family Matters*, a journalist, Gautam, faced threats and humiliation after writing an article against Shiv Sena in the following manner:

Gautam described how a dozen of them had accosted him, screaming that journalists who maligned the Shiv Sena and blackened its good name by printing lies would receive the same treatment. The man twisted his

arms behind him and grabbed his hair to keep him still. They had a tin of Cherry Blossom black shoe polish and applied it to his face, ears and neck, even ruining his shirt in the process. (Mistry 179)

Shiv Sena considers India's secularism approach dangerous to Hindu culture and traditions. They believe the Muslim community is a traitor and ban specific artworks celebrating Valentine's Day. Yezad observes: "What a joke of a government. Clowns and crooks. Or clownish crooks. Santa Claus with mask and machine gun would be a fitting Christmas decoration for the Shiv Sena Or any other party, for that matter" (Mistry 235).

In this way, the marginalised people are forced to follow the principles of the dominant class. The alliance of Shiv Sena and BJP introduced numerous actions to strengthen its position and took advantage of the minority communities; one of these actions was to rename Bombay to Mumbai, which led to a transformation in the lives of ordinary people. One of the characters in the novel *Family Matters*, Mr. Kapoor, refused to edit the name of his store and consequently was murdered by the gangsters of Shiv Sena. In this way, the decision implemented by the people in political power defines the fate of the commoner. Mr. Kapoor considered Bombay as a symbol of identity as he cherished photos of colonial Bombay and told Yezad, "From three pictures, so many memories. And this can happen with every single photo – each one conceals volumes. All you need is the right pair of eyes," he made the gesture of turning a key, "to unlock the magic." This resistance to the change in name is also displayed in Mistry's *Such a Long Journey* when Dinshwanji reacts against this action.

Conclusion

Mistry's novels have socio-political complexities of double displacement and have underscored various issues such as multiculturalism and ethnic identity. He recorded his community's anxieties, uneasiness, insecurity, ethnicity, and a sense of danger. He conveys that race, ethnicity and ideologies of the dominant class govern cultural factors. The drift between ethnic and dominant cultures often leads to unrest in society. It is crucial

to eradicate religious hatred and misconception through proper channels. Mistry provides a world like other Zoroastrian writers, free from domination and hierarchy, which rests on justice and equality. All his works try to inculcate tolerance towards other religions and cultures.

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