

Religion As The Foundation Of Parsi Identity

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Introduction

Rohinton Mistry, acclaimed Canadian author of Parsi lineage was born in 1952 in Mumbai or what was then called Bombay. After getting a B. A. in Mathematics and Economics from the University of Bombay in 1975, he immigrated to Canada, at the age of 23. After working for a few years in a bank in Canada, he enrolled at the University of Toronto and received a B. A. in English and Philosophy. He began to write short stories for which he won two Hart House literary prizes and Canadian Fiction Magazine's annual Contributor's Prize in 1985. In 1987, his collection of short stories titled *Swimming Lessons and Other Stories* from Firozsha Baag was published. *Such a Long Journey* was published in 1991 and it won the Governor General's Award, the Commonwealth Writers Prize for Best Book and the W.H. Smith/Books in Canada, First Novel Award. It was short listed for the prestigious Booker Prize and for the Trillium Award. *A Fine Balance* was published in 1995 and won the Los Angeles Times Book Award for fiction; the Commonwealth Writer's Prize, Canada's prestigious Giller Prize and was a 1996 Booker Prize finalist. Mistry's most recent novel, *Family Matters*, also nominated for the Booker Prize, was awarded the Kiriya Prize for fiction. In 2012 he won the Neustadt International Prize for Literature.

Mistry's works are celebrated for their portrayal of a realistic picture of the state of the nation and its citizens from the view point of a diasporic writer's doubly enhanced vision by virtue of the writer's experience of belonging to two countries and two cultures. More important to this study are the two themes that are central to the works of Rohinton Mistry: Culture and identity; the identity of his protagonists as individuals, the identity of India as a nation in the process of ascertaining its identity as an independent developing country; and the religion and culture of the minority ethno-cultural community of Parsis that Mistry as well as a majority of his characters belong to. Although Mistry is dismissive of the autobiographical nature of his stories;

“Writers write best about what they know ... In the broad sense, as a processing of everything one hears or witnesses, all fiction is autobiographical – imagination ground through the mill of memory. It's impossible to separate the two ingredients”,¹

the rootedness of Mistry's stories in the Parsi enclaves of Bombay, the writer's elaborate depiction of Zoroastrian customs and rituals in his novels and his documentation of the insecurities and problems that plague the Parsi community through his ability to provide deep insights into the minds of the characters of his creation imparts to his books the potential to bring up information on a variety of issues related to the

¹Rohinton Mistry by Peter Morey, Manchester University Press, 2004

Parsi community that will be explored in this chapter, namely: the effect of Parsi religious and cultural particularities on shaping and defining the course of the narrative of Mistry's novels; the role played by Zoroastrian philosophy and rituals in shaping the ethno-cultural identity and ideology of Mistry's characters from the Parsi community in the course of their experiences, reactions and complexities as portrayed in his novels and; the impact of the Zoroastrian religion on the present state of the Parsi community as depicted in Mistry's novels.

Religion as the foundation of Parsi Identity

According to Zoroastrian belief the world has been created by Ahura Mazda according to the law of Asha or the divine order of things. The law of Asha is the principle of righteousness: 'Righteousness is the highest virtue by which all things are exactly what they should be'. Spenta Mainyu, the Bountiful Spirit, promotes the realization of Asha. Angra Mainyu, the Destructive Spirit, violates Asha. Zoroastrianism speaks of the existence of the spiritual (Menog) and the material (Getig) world. In Ahura Mazda's scheme of things for human beings the Getig plane becomes the battleground between the forces of good and evil. The primary mission of man on this earth is to fight evil.

Truly there are two primal Spirits, twins renowned to be in conflict. In thought and word, in act they are two: the better and the bad. And those who act well have chosen rightly between these two, not so the evildoers.

The Gathas, Yasna 30, v. 3

In 'A Brief Exposition of Spirituality in Zoroastrianism' the Zoroastrian high priest of Chicago, Illinois, tells us of the seven attributes of the 'Wise Lord' Ahura Mazda called the Amesha Spentas or beneficent immortals: Ahura Mazda- all knowing creator of life, Vohu Mana- Good mind, Asha Vahishta- righteousness, Khshathra Vairya - divine strength and the power of Ahura Mazda's kingdom, Spenta Armaiti- beneficent right mentality, Haurwataat – Perfection and Ameretaat- immortality.

The message that Mobed Kersey H. Antia wishes to convey to his readers is very simple: when humans acquire all the splendid seven spiritual spheres of Ahura Mazda fully in their being and practice them fully and unceasingly, they attain God's own Beneficent Spirit (Spenta Mainyu) and become Godlike.

"Let us fully emulate the ways of Lord Ahura Mazda, the way he himself has attained immortality, Asha, Good Rule and Perfection. Let us fully realize them in our own being and in our own life in full measure."²

Yasna 34.1

According to Zoroastrianism, good happens to those who do righteous deeds. The central concept in the Zoroastrian religion is 'Happiness to him who is righteous for the sake of righteousness. 'Zoroastrian morality is summed up in the simple phrase, Manashni, Gavashni, Kunashni,' or 'good thoughts, good words,

² A brief exposition of spirituality in Zoroastrianism by Mobed Kersey H. Antia accessed from the internet on 17 July 2014.

good deeds' (Humata, Hukhta, Hvarshata in Avestan). When Parsis follow this basic principle Asha is maintained and Druj or evil is kept in check. Zoroastrianism requires its adherent to make a conscious choice to participate in the battle against evil. Those who choose evil have only themselves to blame for their ruin.

The evil is created not by Ahura Mazda but by the wrong use of free will made by humans by making bad choices endangering and compromising the existence. Mankind's task is to ensure that ultimately this physical existence is cleansed of all evil generating from the ungodly choices made by humans and restore it fully to the pristine condition in which Ahura Mazda created it and thereby leading it to Perfection/Resurrection (Frashokereti) in every way-

Yasna 30.9

As Mobed Kersey H. Antia reiterates later in the same article, only when a good Zoroastrian does his duty out of his own freewill by siding with goodness and truth against the forces of dishonesty and evil, will peace prevail and life on earth flourish as Ahura Mazda intends it to:

“As the Hoshbaam Prayer tells us, we can become one (or friend) with Ahura Mazda by observing Asha Vahishta (Best Truth) as best as we can in our life and hereby removing all the (Angra) qualities lurking in us and around us. God has never forsaken us after creating this world but is dwelling in everything and everyone around us if we only care to recognize it and use our free will to side with him and help Him to bring about Frashokereti when only the eternal life and goodness will prevail on earth.”³

It comes as no wonder that the plots of all of Mistry's books reflect the same teachings of the Parsi religion; the concept of good and evil as combative opposites is played out repeatedly, where the protagonists must make the difficult choice of going against all odds in choosing the side of good at great personal risk and sacrifice so as to fulfil Zoroastrianism's basic requirement of its adherent to be on the side of the righteous. Mistry's novels seem to repeatedly ask a question that is pivotal to Zoroastrianism as is apparent from the following hymn from the Yasna:

“This I ask you, O Ahura, tell me truly: How can I deliver deceit into the hands of truth?”

References

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https://czcjournal.org/articles/Spirituality_Kersey_Antia.pdf
2. Morey, Peter - Rohinton Mistry, Manchester University Press, 2004

³ A brief exposition of spirituality in Zoroastrianism by Mobed Kersey H. Antia accessed from the internet on 17 July 2014.