

CHRONICLING THE INVISIBLE: CYRUS MISTRY'S *CHRONICLE OF A CORPSE BEARER*

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Abstract:

The present paper seeks to examine the delineation of Khandias, the traditional pallbearers of the Parsi community, in Mistry's novel 'Chronicle of a Corpse Bearer' (2012). Khandias are the 'dalits' of the Zoroastrian community, subjected to the same ignominy, stigma and segregation. The novel has received widespread recognition because it is, probably, a pioneering fictional account of the discrimination faced by this small sub caste of a community, the Parsis, who are usually perceived as progressive, neoteric and affluent. In the course of the novel, the narrator, Phiroze, interrogates the credibility of those religious injunctions which sanctions and normalizes the exploitation and abhorrent treatment of a group of individuals. Phiroze's captivating personal tale of love and loss is beautifully intertwined with the story of the khandia community.

Key Words: Caste, khandia, segregation, nussesalar, social discrimination.

Ralph Ellison's influential work, *Invisible Man* (1952), foregrounded social, racial and political 'invisibility' suffered by the African-Americans in the predominantly white American culture. The unnamed narrator poignantly shows how the prejudiced white society is predisposed to perceive the black community in detrimental ways, which renders the actual, lived experience of the blacks unseen and unvocalized. A similar invisibility is suffered by the Khandias, a minuscule population of the already small Parsi community. Their job is to perform the last rites of the deceased before consigning them to the *dakhma* or the Tower of Silence, their mortal remains to be consumed by the vultures. Unexacting as it may sound, the work is nonetheless strenuous and gruesome. Furthermore, they are treated as pariahs, although, ironically, the Zoroastrian scripture promises the deliverance of their souls. As Phiroze Elchidana, the novel's narrator and protagonist says:

The nussesalar who performs his duties scrupulously, forever escapes the cycle of rebirth, decrepitude and death. What the scriptures forgot to mention, though, is that in this, his final incarnation his fellow men will treat him as dirt, the very embodiment of shit: in other words, untouchable to the core (Mistry 18).¹

Chronicle of a Corpse Bearer (2012) is a fictional drama novel by author, playwright and journalist Cyrus Mistry. It won the DSC Prize for South Asian Literature (2014) as well as the Sahitya Akademi Award (2015). In the Author's Note, Mistry recounts the story behind the genesis of the novel. In 1991, he was commissioned by a British channel to write a proposal for a documentary film based on the Khandia community. The film was never made but the story of "this small segregated caste" stayed with him. He was especially impressed by the story of a man called Mehli Cooper who, being a khandia, organised in 1942 an "unprecedented" but not quite successful strike of the khandias. The character Phiroze is based on Mehli Cooper.

In India, the Parsis are a minority, based mostly in Bombay. Mahvesh Murad, reviewing the novel for *Dawn*, writes:

It's always amazed me that a culture as rich, as ancient as that of the Zoroastrian's does not have much fiction written about it... a culture that has yielded empires as

influential as the Achaemenid and Sassanid and yet dwindled into a worldwide community of less than two hundred thousand people means that it must have a million stories to tell.²

Some famous Indian Parsi writers like Firdaus Kanga, Gieve Patel, Keki N. Daruwalla, Farrukh Dhondy and Dina Mehta have written closely about their community, thereby giving us a glimpse of their culture and customs. Such narratives save a community from obscurity and inculcate a better understanding of its lived experience among the wider populace. Cyrus Mistry's younger brother is Rohinton Mistry, the celebrated Indo-Canadian writer of novels such as *Such a long journey* (1991) and *A Fine Balance* (1995). Both of them have based their stories in Bombay, transmuting some of their personal experiences as materials for their works.

In this novel, Mistry attempts to 'chronicle' the social ostracization and vilification endured by the khandias. Typically, a chronicle is a factual account of an event or series of events put forth in the order of their occurrence. The novel, narrated in the first person, interweaves the story of the khandia community with the intensely personal tale of one man, Phiroze Elchidana. Significantly, Phiroze is not a khandia by birth. In fact, he is born to the head priest of a fire temple in Bombay. Through this plot device, Mistry juxtaposes the supposedly 'holy' with the 'unholy', and the narrator is able to present an insider's view of both worlds that of the priest and the pariah.

Phiroze is the son of Framroze and Hilla, born on a "highly auspicious day of the Zoroastrian calendar". Although he is regarded as a dimwit since childhood, yet his father stubbornly hoped that he would someday become a head priest like himself or even a renowned Parsi scholar. However, Phiroze yearns to escape the "narrow, claustal world" of the fire temple. He hates the "feeling of being hemmed in by the norms of temple living..." (50). One is reminded of Karsan Dargawalla, the protagonist of M.G. Vassanji's novel *The Assassin's Song* (2007), who shows a similar longing for escaping his family's religious legacy. On the pretext of attending coaching classes, Phiroze loiters around the city, even exploring the seedier parts of Bombay. What puts an end to his aimless wanderings is the discovery of Doongerwadi Hill, the estate of the Tower of Silence, which seems to this offspring of a head priest the "most beautiful" and "secluded island of peace in the entire city". Here, he meets Sepideh, the daughter of Temoorus, a corpse-bearer who has his own scores to settle with Framroze. In order to marry his beloved Sepideh, Phiroze abandons the sanctum of the fire temple and becomes a *nussesalar* in the Tower of Silence, much to his father's dismay. *Nussesalar* in ancient Avestan means "Lord of the Unclean". They rank higher than the ordinary khandias, often performing priest-like duties, but are actually "glorified untouchable".

Mistry undermines the dichotomy between purity and pollution, which is at the heart of religious segregation, through Phiroze's characteristically irreverent attitude towards the Zoroastrian rituals. More often than not, he uses sarcasm and irony to point out their illogicality. Phiroze feels that the "older I grew the more absurd any requirement of pomposity or piety seemed...". On the one hand, we see the orthodox Framroze unbendingly following these rituals, especially the strict injunctions on personal hygiene as enjoined in the scriptures. He believes that the modern world is suffering from so many "strange, new and incurable" diseases because "people have forgotten the conjunction between hygiene and spirituality". On the other hand, Phiroze says:

Naturally, I could not help being amused by the overblown logic or lack of it in some of these injunctions, which may have had good reason for being enjoined upon primitive pastoral tribes some three thousand or five thousand years ago, but didn't need to be glorified into obsessive, all-embracing moral codes. Their obvious rationale at the time would have been sanitary - it seemed evident even to me not mystical or 'scientific', as my father would have us believe (46).

Phiroze even suffers from an uncontrollable urge to giggle whenever he witnesses exaggerated importance being given to elaborate religious rituals. The ancient Avestan hymns seems to be “dead language” to him. One day, he sees a small bonfire burning a pile of trash. He is well aware of the fact that fire is a sacred symbol for any Zoroastrian as it represents the Holy Fire, but Phiroze feels a sudden, “perverse” impulse to pee on it.

Stratification of the society on the basis of caste has existed for centuries in India. The Hindu caste-system has its roots in the ancient religious texts. The Parsis, although now an integral part of the Indian society, were originally outsiders, emigrating to India from Persia in order to escape persecution by the Arabs. Yet, the khandias are discriminated against in the same manner as the *shudras* among the Hindus. Furthermore, it's the ancient Zoroastrian texts that sanctions such inequity. Why the khandias are treated as untouchables is because in the Zoroastrian faith, dead matter is considered unclean and polluting. They have to come into contact with dead flesh in order to prepare corpses for consumption by the vultures. Although, one could say that the khandias perform a very noble service for their community, yet they are treated as outcasts. In one instance, Phiroze describes how his accidental touch left a man absolutely flabbergasted, who recoiled in disgust. The sanctum sanctorum of the Fire Temple is inaccessible to them. Even to visit his father in his residential quarter in the temple premises, Phiroze had to undergo lengthy purification rituals. Still, Framroze prudently kept his distance.

As shown in the novel, the pallbearers have to carry corpses in heavy iron biers. Sometimes, in a single day, they have to travel to several distant places in the city to collect bodies and bring them to the Tower of Silence. They have to perform the revolting task of anointing every “orifice” of the body with “strong-smelling” bull's urine, before wrapping it up in fresh muslins. In order to bear the revulsion they feel, the corpse-bearers often consume alcohol. Phiroze says, “I ask you this, how else are the best of us to keep this carrion work, this constant consanguinity with corpses, without taking a drop or two? The smell of sickness and pus endures; the reek of extinction never leaves the nostrils” (10). This habitual consumption takes a toll on their health, as Phiroze suffers from arthritis and sciatica in his old age.

Since the pallbearers are few in number, each one has to perform this demanding task relentlessly. In one instance, Phiroze faints in the middle of the road while carrying a corpse through the town. He hadn't eaten anything that day, and was exhausted. The media paints this incident as deliberate negligence on the part of the corpse-bearers. The Parsi Punchayet, which should be ideally safeguarding the interests of the khandis, are corrupt and couldn't care less about their situation. They blame the khandias squarely and prohibit the consumption of alcohol in the Tower of Silence, also suspending several of them, including Phiroze. The corpse-bearers are, rightfully, enraged. Suspension meant they wouldn't be paid, when they had large families to feed. Also, the remaining pallbearers would have to work in double and triple shifts. Instead of hiring more workers, the Punchayet effectively made the situation worse. When Phiroze and others meet the trustees, they are criticized and put on probation, even though some have been working for more than eight years. Phiroze tries to explain that he wasn't drunk; he fainted because of sunstroke and hunger, but the trustees completely disregard his plight.

Since the idea for the novel came to Mistry when he heard about a khandia strike, it's important to observe the depiction of this strike in his fiction. Interestingly, the strike, led by Phiroze, is successful, unlike the actual strike led by Mehli Cooper. The Parsi Punchayet roused indignation among the khandias with its callous refusal to address their problems. Discussing the probable course of action with his group, Phiroze is reminded of Seppy's incisive comment:

If you guys are so important to the Zarthostis, why don't they provide you better working conditions? Its sheer hypocrisy to say you guys'll have your reward in the

next lifetime; yet treat you like offal in this one... Why don't you guys get together, do something about it? Protest....(104).

It was, historically, the time of the Non-Cooperation movement, led by Mahatma Gandhi. Influenced by these, Phiroze and others decide to launch their own “peaceful non-cooperation” to register their grievances. Their “charter of demands” are “modest and reasonable”, requesting an eight-hour working day, overtime compensation and ten days' casual leave in a year. However, the Panchayet, still not ready to acknowledge their predicament and sensing the possibility of a rebellion, sends Coyaji to talk them out of it. But Coyaji leaves the pallbearers incensed when he tries to take the moral high ground by labelling the Panchayet as their “guardians” and the corpse-bearers as ordinary “rabble-rousers”. They finally go on a strike, stopping all work. The Panchayet, on receiving criticism as well as fearing further trouble, yields to their demands. By depicting the khandias as victorious, Mistry gives them the agency to bring about social change, if only fictionally.

Just as inter-caste marriages are frowned upon among the Hindus, the well-off Parsis avoid marrying into the khandia community. In the novel, Vera, the educated and intelligent daughter of Phiroze's fellow corpse-bearer, Rustom, falls in love with the son of an affluent Parsi businessman, but is eventually rejected by his family because of her caste. Such deep is the isolation felt by Phiroze that, at one point in the novel, when he is forced into a homosexual encounter by the detestable Buchia, his disgust is clouded by a feeling of gratefulness that at least he is seen as a desirable man by another human being.

Conclusion:

Most of the significant events in the novel are set in the pre-Independence period. But what makes this story still relevant is the fact that the khandias continue to face discrimination. A news published in the *Times of India* in 2015, titled “Spotlight's on khandias, the Parsi 'untouchables'” reports that a group of khandias in Mumbai have joined a peaceful protest to demand salary hike and other benefits.³ Their present condition, as described in the article, is not radically different from Mistry's account. The immediate experiences of this small community have universal appeal. In an interview published in *The Hindu*, Cyrus Mistry says:

This (*Chronicle of a Corpse Bearer*) itself was an experiment, writing about one community on a small microscopic canvas. To take that canvas and raise large questions was metaphorical: people aren't familiar with the community I was writing about. But it worked because of the tiny focus of the novel.⁴

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