

Chronicling from the Margins: A Quest for Ethno-religious Identity in Cyrus Mistry's *Chronicle of a Corpse Bearer*

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Abstract

Parsis are known as the followers of Prophet Zarathustra. They set their footprints at Diu in Kathiawar but soon moved from there to Sanjan, a place in south Gujarat, where they stayed for about eight hundred years. They are an ethnoreligious, peace-loving, and hard-working minority community of India. Parsis are rather rigid about their religion. Tower of Silence or dokhma is the place where Parsis expose their dead bodies to vultures. The rituals of the deceased begin with the carrying dead person's body from their homes and it is carried out by corpse bearers. Washing of the bodies is performed by the female of the corpse bearers. Cyrus Mistry's Chronicle of a Corpse Bearer is a brilliant novel that represents the community of Parsi corpse bearers, the Khandhias, who carry the bodies of the deceased to the Tower of Silence. This paper seeks to unearth through the protagonist Phiroze, the personal suffering, life, and death of an isolated community of Khandia within the Parsi ethnoreligious community. It shows the way we look at justice, custom, love, life, and death through the story of a marginalized community and their involvement in reshaping India. Cyrus Mistry's novel is a moving account of tragic love that at the same time, brings to vivid and unforgettable life the degradation experienced by those who inhabit the unforgiving margins of history.

Key Words: Parsi, Minority, Marginalized identity, Tower of Silence, Khandhias, Chronicle, Corpse Bearer, Social discrimination.

Mary Boyce in her celebrated book *Zoroastrians: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices* claimed that the Parsi religion is one of the oldest religions in the world and it has a living history of about three thousand years. Parsis are known as the followers of Prophet Zarathustra. They are an ethno-religious, peace-loving, and hard-working minority community of India. This minority community was much harassed by the religious persecution of the Muslims and after fleeing from Persia, have settled in India sometime between 785 A. D. and 936 A. D. They set their footprints at Diu in Kathiawar but soon moved from there to Sanjan, a place in south Gujarat, where they stayed for about eight hundred years.

Parsis are rather rigid about their religion. A non-Parsi person is not allowed inside the fire temple. After performing the *Navjot* ceremony, a newborn is always introduced as Zarathustra, not before that. This "Navjote" means a new initiation for offering Zoroastrian prayers. In this Navjote ceremony,

Kusti, a sacred thread, which has seventy-two folds of fine, lamb's wool is worn. The ritual of the burial of the dead person is a very unusual and unique one in this religion. "When it comes to disposal of the corpse, our religion is so sensible. We don't pollute the earth burying, or the air, by cremating....." (Mistry 172) Tower of Silence or *dokhma* is the place where Parsis expose their dead bodies to vultures but where no such tower exists, then burial or cremation is practised in exception. This Tower of Silence or *dokhma* is usually built with a round stone or brick structure on a hilltop. The height of this tower is about 15 meters and perhaps 100 meters across, with an internal platform on which three separate ranks of stone slabs remain for the bodies of men, women, and children, sloping down toward a central dry well. The rituals of the deceased begin with the carrying dead person's body from their homes and it is carried out by corpse bearers. Washing of the bodies is performed by the female of the corpse bearer. The corpse bearers place the dead body there and within a very short span vultures turned them into mere bones. This ritual is known as *Dakhmenashini*. Later on, the corpse bearers return to throw the bones down inside the central well. It has sand and charcoal in it to protect the earth from the pollution of death. Zoroastrians trust in the immortality of the soul which remains around the dead body for three days, and during this period rituals are performed for the dead. It is supposed that the soul will be judged by the Spiritual judge Mitra at the Chinvat Bridge between this world and the next. Heaven will be assigned to them if someone's benevolent actions outweigh the evil deeds; if good and evil, are equally weighted one will proceed to a place like Purgatory. Parsi believes that the dead are surrounded by evil and that is why the head of the corpse bearer is called the slayer of the demon.

The unique arrival of the Parsis in India has a crucial effect on Indian Socio-cultural and Political life. With a very tiny population, they have become an essential part of Indian culture. Using Toynbee's jargon, the Indian Parsis may be called one of the important "creative minorities". During British Raj, the Parsi community expressed their keenness for anglo-maniac tendencies. Apart from business and industry, the Parsis became undoubtedly more successful in their contributions to literature. The Parsi writers have created a significant volume of literary output, which now forms an important constituent in the Indian literature in English. We have many foremost Indian Parsi writers. They can be divided into two groups, Stay-at-home writers, B. K. Karanjia, Dina Mehta, and Expatriate writers like Farrukh Dhondy, Rohinton Mistry, and Perin Bharucha, Ardashir Vakil, Boman Desai, Firdaus Kanga, Keki Daruwala, Homi Bhabha. Bapsi Sidhwa is dividing time between Pakistan and America. Cyrus Mistry falls into the category of Stay-at-Home writers.

Rohinton Mistry is a very popular name in the field of Indian English literature but Cyrus Mistry, Rohinton Mistry's brother is not a much-known face until he bags DSL Prize for South Asian Literature at Jaipur Literary Festival in 2014. He starts his writing career as a playwright, freelance journalist, and

short story writer. His play *Doongaji House* written in 1977, when he was only twenty-one, has acquired seminal status in contemporary Indian theatre in English. One of his short stories was made into a Gujarati feature film. His plays and screenplays have won several awards. Apart from this celebrated novel, he has published two other works of fiction- *The Radiance of Ashes* (2005) and *Passion Flowers: Stories* (2014). His first novel *The Radiance of Ashes* was shortlisted for the Crossword Prize. This novel under review has been released in 2012. Khushwant Singh states: 'Cyrus Mistry's new novel shines a light on a little-known segment of the Parsi community. It is brilliant and unsettling'.

Bombay is closely linked both with India's pre-colonial and its colonial past..." (Klein 61) At the very edge of its many interlocking worlds, the city of Bombay conceals a near-invisible community of Parsi corpse bearers, the Khandhias, who carry the bodies of the deceased to the Tower of Silence. Thus, Bombay, the economic capital of India, has become the backdrop of the novel *Chronicle of a Corpse Bearer*, like other celebrated novels *Baumgartner's Bombay* (1988) by Anita Desai, *Moor's Last Sigh* (1995) by Rushdie, *Family Matters* (2002) by Rohinton Mistry, *Maximum City: Bombay Lost and Found* (2004) by Suketu Mehta, etc. Cyrus also confined Bombay as a microcosm of Parsi social order like his brother Rohinton Mistry. Cyrus Mistry answered in an interview with Amrita Madhukalya, "We know the Parsi intimately, and I think that reflects in our writings." This narrative is based purely on historical facts and there is no political aspect. The story is about the poor and ostracized community, the Khandhias, known as the corpse bearers in Parsi society. Theirs is a lot that nobody would willingly espouse. The wretched condition of the Khandhias is pitted against the Bombay cityscape. Graphic details of Parsi religious rituals are coherently narrated amid the backdrop of waging urbanisation and the wave of real estate boom and simultaneously waning of the population of vultures in the sky of the financial capital of India. The Parsi community has worried about the dwindling numbers of vultures as that is the only means of the disposal of dead bodies.

The novel deeply discusses this grave issue, which is much more relevant in the present scenario, the extinction of vultures resulting at the end of a ritual and causing ecological imbalance. Decomposers have a significant role in maintaining the food chain and ecological balance. The novel critiques the drugs and unnatural hazards causing the extinction of vultures. The first description of vultures in the novel goes like this, "How beautiful and peaceful is this place- much of the time at least- where the faithful consign their dead to the vultures in a final act of charity, their bones pulverized by the sun, then washed away....subsumed in the elements" (Mistry 11). Until the 1980s the decline in the population of vultures was not observed. By the mid-nineties, the decline in the flocks of vultures became more visible and a topic of discussion in the small community of Bombay Parsis. The novel parallels and echoes the reduction of vultures resulting in the reduction of Parsis. The narrator says, "It's a sad irony, I suppose,

though pretty amusing as well: vultures have become extinct, even before Parsis could. A core element of our communal identity, a distinguishing feature of our creed is lost. Three thousand years or more of a previously revered tradition is at the end because of a certain drug much used in veterinary compounds, which causes kidney failure in vultures that consume animal carcasses packed with it” (240).

Mistry ornamented the political sub-theme in the novel “The book doesn’t have much to do with facts and figures. The novel shows life, death, and personal suffering,” Moreover, the book knits a significant narrative of pre-Independence Indians. The Khandhias’ segregation meant that their involvement in history is almost nothing. “In a way, I’m conveying that life was very difficult for these people. The 40s was a bad time for them because of their isolation. I’ve shown how they saw the outside world”. Phiroze’s religious dilemma and unwilling sentiments to adhere to the norms of religion are akin to Mr. Dedalus in James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, “Stephen’s highly sensitive artistic self and his deliberate sins produce different emotions that clash with catholic teachings, creating dilemma” (Toplu 76). Just like the alienation of Dedalus from his family and friends, Phiroze chose to be in the Tower of Silence, as a stranger aloof from the ordinary mundane world. Corpse bearers generally live an isolated life away from the normal world. This was shocking that Phiroze’s father lived a strict and pious religious life and desires his son would become a priest. There is a huge deal of contrast in the matter of religious beliefs between son and father as well as between husband and wife.

Marginalization is a tricky and multi-layered concept. Whole societies can be marginalized at the global level while classes and communities can be marginalized from the dominant social order. Similarly, ethnic groups, families, or individuals can be marginalized within localities. To a certain extent, marginalization is a shifting phenomenon, linked to social status. Mostly the down-trodden Parsis people take up the job of Khandia to ameliorate and strengthen their existing economic state. They are the marginalized sub-caste of the Parsi community often termed as Outcaste, Nussesalar, The God of Unclean, and The Untouchable of the core. Despite this, they are deprived of their due payment which further propels them to remain in a state of utter paucity. The novel is a mirror of such an extraordinary and rich world of the marginalized. The Parsi community whose pangs are unsung and their grief is never realized. They are vulnerable, elegant, historically fascinating, and also very touching whom we come across in this story of courage and hope. Cyrus Mistry offers beautiful historical details and existential against while gently questioning the way we look at justice, custom, love, life, and death. This novel is as much a story of a marginalized community as it is about love and death.

If we go into the chronological details and order of the events, then we can justify the title of the novel. It is indeed *A Chronicle of a Corpse Bearer*. The year is noticeably mentioned in the narrative, the according to historical events, “1935 was the year in which Seppy and I got married. It was also the year,

I remember, in which a new Government of India Act was proclaimed by our British rulers. When Gandhiji undertook his famous salt march in 1930, I was still in school” (Mistry 122). Phiroze once accidentally fell while carrying a corpse. It became sensational shocking news and was covered in the Bombay Chronicle on 6th August 1942. I had a strong reaction and commotion in the community which resulted from Parsi Panchayat initiating an inquiry and Buchia, manager of Corpse bearer suspended members of the corpse bearer community. His real name was Nusli Kavarana, but it was so sadistic that he was universally known as Buchia, or the ‘Corker’. (Mistry 15) Under the leadership of Phiroze and Rustom, a senior and father figure of the corpse bearer confederation, for the first time in the history of Khandhias, all members unanimously declare the strike, cease work, to collect bodies from the deceased’s home.

The novel is divided into three parts, part one: ‘Present Tense Bombay, 1942’; second part: ‘echoes of a living past’ and the part three is: ‘future Imperfect’. Each part is like travelling of time which is suggested in the title ‘chronicle’. Phiroze narrates political news of the local and the world which all used to hear on the Radio. ‘a priceless instrument’ (Mistry 120); “..... a magic box from which all knowledge and truth flowed.” (Mistry 121). Cyrus Mistry has brought an interesting comparison between the prevailing oppressive English rule in pre-independent India and on the other side, in the same fashion, a tyrannical superior, Buchia who exploits all corpse bearers. When the news of the struggle and non-cooperation movement flashes on the radio, Phiroze was so motivated by it that he decides to go with the strike, it is the impact of *Satyagraha*. As the Radio broadcast announces the prized Independence of India we have in the narrative where Phiroze is out of the fetters of Buchia, for the very first time this neglected community gains some status, better wages, free days and fixed working hours “Temoor often turned into ISBS as well, or Indian State Broadcasting Service, which later became AIR- All India Radio or Akashvani.” (Mistry 122).

Ngugi Wa Thiongo commented in his Preface to *Writers in Politics* (1981),

“Literature cannot escape from the class power structures that shape our everyday life. Here a writer has no choice. Whether or not he is aware of it, his works reflect one or more aspects of the intense economic, political, cultural, and ideological struggles in society. What he can choose is one or the other side on the battlefield...what he or she cannot do is to remain neutral. Every writer is a writer in politics. The only question is what and whose politics.”

When one writes, it is expected they will draw material and inspiration from the world around them. The adjacent milieu will reflect in their writing. The dearth of Parsi in India, as well as Parsi authors who present the unknown world of this small community, is very much a matter of concern and this work proves a groundbreaking work to bring light to this unknown mostly neglected lot of

Khandhias. The novel is set in the Tower of Silence, talking about the microcosm life of the corpse bearers. This statement by Mistry “I thought of taking a minimalist platform and through that try to raise larger questions.” during an interview with *The Hindu* indeed rings true. There were matters regarding the position of Khandhias previously. Many channels were covering these concerns and newspapers raised questions about the practice of dokhma, outrage of those who may have no idea of Zoroastrianism at all. My protagonist Phiroze Elchidana keeps squiggling details of his life and this narration is a novel which is narrated by him, mentioned as Phiroze or Elchi is a stupid boy who was not unsuccessful to keep his parents’ expectations, a tramp, who later becomes a corpse bearer by choice after falling in love for girl Sepideh, daughter of corpse bearer Temoo. Once when he attends a funeral ceremony with his mother he sees Sepideh for the first time and falls in love with her. Sepideh’s father demands him to convert into a Khandia, if he wants to marry her. He becomes a Khandia to marry her. He has a daughter named Seppy. His life becomes miserable after he loses Sepideh. Seppy dies after seven years of their union. Phiroze’s brother, Vispy is a brilliant student. Mother Hilla is very much disappointed with her nuptial life and very close to Vispy, an ideal son she always preferred. We have found a case of sibling rivalry. His father, a head priest of the Soonamai Ichchaporia fire temple, was utterly shocked and did not admit his son’s conversion to living as Khandhia, knowing that being a part of a sub-community treated poorly and with derision and contempt. Khandhias are considered the untouchables of the Parsi community because of their contact with deceased persons- dead flesh being considered unclean within the Zoroastrian faith. It is written in Parsi scriptures that the soul of the corpse bearer will not undergo rebirth. His father, with a devout and sacred belief, holds himself so firm that he never accepts his son ever again. The significance of Khandias in the Parsi community is known, when Elchi narrates, “All corpses radiate an invisible but harmful effluvium, according to the scriptures. Through prescribed ablutions, prophylactics, and prayers, I’m supposed to protect the general populace- and myself- from the noxious effects of the dead; indeed, you could say the Nussesalar shields the community from all that evil and putrefaction by absorbing it into his being”. (17)

Phiroze can be trained as a nussesalar, a strange word from the ancient Avestan, meaning “Lord of the Unclean”, but he is still very much a corpse bearer, living in the designated compound of the grounds surrounding the Tower of Silence with other members of the Khandhia community. They spend long hours travelling by foot to collect corpses from various parts of the city and prepare them for the funeral and their final journey into the Towers. A nussesalar mentioned the number of corpse bearers, “Our brigade of corpse carriers, in the employ of the Punchayet, consisted of only thirteen men. Plus two nussesalars.” (91) Fali Bamboat, Taimur Ollia, Boman Khambatta, Rustom Anklesaria, Jungoo Driver, Khushro, Farokh Chinoy, Fardoon, Cawas are other members who face insults and contempt of society for being the untouchables in Parsi community. The nussesalar has to “perform 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 like dirt, the very embodiment of shit: in other words, untouchable to the core...You could say, though, that as a nussesalar, I am a glorified untouchable” (Mistry 18). The enclosed life within the Tower of Silence is not vapid, with no connection to the outer world. “The truth was our lives were so closed, so dispossessed, even world wars, riots, or our own country’s struggle for Independence hardly seemed to matter. So far removed were we from these fateful eventualities of history that, except by a complex chain of inferences and deductions, none of them touched our personal lives at all” (Mistry 124). This must be harder for a man who wanders around Bombay for self-learning. Phiroze lost his interest in the world after the premature demise of his beloved Seppy.

Everything occurs within the closed gate of the corpse bearer in the Tower of Silence. It was a trial of life for Phiroze. The board of trustees neglected the issues of financial and other difficulties of Khandhias at that time. The tough exertion they put in and the awkward working hours were the main sufferings. The real killer is a constant touch of death in the idyllic setting. “Those damn biers we lug around- solid iron- each weighs nearly eighty pounds!....The smell of sickness and pus endures; the reek of extinction never leaves the nostrils” (Mistry 10). The distinctive job of a corpse bearer is no fool’s play. It requires a lot of courage to go through every ritual. “It is a job that takes courage and strength, believe me--- rubbing the dead man’s forehead, his chest, palms, and the soles of his feet with strong-smelling bull’s urine, anointing every orifice of the body with it” (Mistry 10).

The incident where a woman covers the sanctity of the Tower of Silence, clicking pictures of composed dead bodies in the well is loosely based on the real-life story of a woman who demanded some respect for her dead mother’s body. The vast premises of Doongerwadi in Mumbai are the setting of the novel. We find a lot of similarities and a lot of differences in the description of the locations too. According to a report of *Parsiana* (a Parsi magazine) dated 7th June 2006 “Only three of the five dakhmas (tower of silence) are operational (the Framji Cowasji Banaji dakhma built-in 1832 is not used as residents of the Grand Paradi Apartments adjacent to the Doongerwadi lands can look into the tower and the Mody Hirjibhai Vatcha-Gandhi, the smallest dakhma built-in 1670 is used for consigning corpses of Parsi women married to non-Parsis who continue to profess the Zoroastrian religion and 1778 Anjuman dakhma built-in 1778)” (Patel 2007). Thus, the Doongerwadi is no more used for *Dakhmenashini*.

Parsis have adopted the Gujarati language ever since they settled in Sanjan in 8th A.D. “*Baes* , *Baes*” (Sit, Sit) “*Aae Ghela*” (Come Madman), are some of the Gujarati expressions in the novel. Mistry used almost every aspect of Gujarati in his work. Only one verse from *Avesta* is mentioned in the novel.

V.L.V.N. Narendra Kumar noted “Parsi novelists have forged a dialect....their prose is interspersed with Persian words and Gujarati expression” There is corpse bearer Kobaad, youngest in lot recites a bhajan (religious song) which is translated into English by Mistry. In the ‘Author’s Note’ in the book, Mistry reveals what inspired him to write this novel and how it happens, “The person who told me this story, Aspi Cooper was a son of this improbable marriage. Improbable, because no one in his right mind would voluntarily accept the vicious stigmas that attached to the profession of corpse bearer in those days....the protagonist of the story is, however, the former dock worker, his father Mehli Cooper” He is the real-life Phiroze.

The life of the corpse bearers has changed due to socio-political changes in India, World War II, and a roar in the real estate business in Bombay. This has brought about a hopeful future, better life and lessened the social stigma. The corpse bearers got better payment, residential quarters, free education up to high school, easy loans, and scholarship facilities for further education for their children. These are some of the promising changes in the life of Khandhias which ultimately happened after 35 years span of the controversial strike. Cyrus Mistry once replied to an interview by Ananya Borgohain regarding the origin of this novel:

“I could write Chronicle of a Corpse Bearer because in 1991 I was asked by a friend to research for a documentary he was making for Channel 4. I spoke to them about their lives, their past, ancestors, what their present lives and works are like, and so on. At that time, one of them told me a story about his father who had spent his life being a corpse bearer in the 1940s. He had led a strike for better working conditions for the workers. I tried to find out in the Parsi Panchayat office for any record of this strike that had happened but there was none. He was fired from the job and later became a very withdrawn person. This was in 1940 or 1941...I extended it through imagination and finally wrote the novel, which was a love story about a priest’s son and a corpse bearer’s daughter.”

There is a constant apprehension of death Phiroze suffers. Seppy will fade away from his memory once he mentioned “how quickly it becomes to remember a person who is dead with any sort of clarity...The details are fading faster than I can hold on to them” (119). Seven years of togetherness except that no other woman in his life except once he is exploited by Buchia (163) Mistry declared this novel “a love story” is true with the poetic, longing last words of the novel are “That I will meet her again....”(245). It remains a tale of love and longing amid poverty, insults, alienation, and suffering of life within the walls of small untouchable corpse bearers. Segregated from the mainstream city life, isolated in the enclosed living, a poor untouchable neglected, ghetto that was marginalised by the noncompliant authorities and perceptions of the old belief, all these factors sum up to the worst period of

any corpse bearers' life during 1940 onwards is well captured. The plight of a small minority and the stark realities of their lives would have been unnoticed without *Chronicle of a Corpse Bearer*. *Chronicle of a Corpse Bearer* is a love story interwoven into the caste system of the Parsi community.

The present paper serves to recapitulate the fact that the protagonist of Cyrus Mistry's novel passes through the conduits of various social and cultural realities as the plot of the novel rolls towards maturity. This is found to be culturally and linguistically expectable to the contemporary world. There is a fine fusion of the harsh reality of life and fiction as a genre. A candid attempt has been messaged by expounding and evaluating two aspects of the novel-ethnocentrism and marginalization because these signs or metaphors constitute the fathomable edifice of the study. The process of becoming is found to be inextricably intertwined into the complex rubric of socioeconomic, political, cultural, scientific and technological, and linguistic realities of the contemporary Parsi world. In addition to this, it also explains some plausible reasons for circumscribing it within the texture of modern concepts about the Indian Parsi life. It initially proposes that modern novels are characterized by some incessant process of becoming, where the dichotomy between the subject and object, self and other is evaded and obliterated. They define reality in its contingency in which time, memory, and history play some important role.

It only shows the personal suffering, life, and death of the Parsi community. The isolation of Khandia's gives us the idea that they have negligible involvement in reshaping India. There are numerous examples that our country has attained freedom after a lot of struggle. People have given their lives for it irrespective of their caste and creed. Despite their cooperation, they are neglected and it is the real pain that they feel deeply engraved in their heart. Not only in the Parsi community but in all the communities people have given a lot of contributions to attain the freedom of our country.

Thus, Cyrus Mistry's novel is a moving account of tragic love that at the same time, brings to vivid and unforgettable life the degradation experienced by those who inhabit the unforgiving margins of history. Mistry weaves together all-important topics of love and death in a chemical, magical world that the reader will remember long after putting down this book.

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