PORTRAYAL OF RELIGIOUS FUNDAMENTALISM IN LITERATURE

Sujata Chakravorty*

*Associate Professor & Head,
Department of English,
Dayanand Arya Kanya Mahavidyalaya,
RTM Nagpur University,
Nagpur, Maharashtra, India.

ABSTRACT

The beginning of Fundamentalism as a movement can be traced back to the late 19th century, when it was used at the Niagara Bible Conference (1878-1897) for the tenets that were considered fundamental to the Christian belief. The term has gathered momentum ever since with other religious groups defining their convictions—Jewish fundamentalism, Islamic fundamentalism, Hindu fundamentalism, Buddhist fundamentalism, Parsi fundamentalism, etc. The problem arises when after delimiting their precincts these groups strictly adhere to them, expecting others to appreciate and follow their methods, at times bordering on the fanatical. Mention must be made of “atheistic fundamentalism” which means loss of faith in religion and religious practices. Fundamentalism as a term is also increasingly being used as a synonymous one for extremism of any form—market fundamentalism, economic fundamentalism, cultural fundamentalism etc. This paper proposes to evaluate the works of Rohinton Mistry with reference to the religious fundamentalism of the Parsis. The Parsis were originally inhabitants of Persia, modern day Iran. Persia witnessed invasions by Alexander the Great, the Greeks, the Arabs, the Mongols, and the Turks. The Zoroastrians, (followers of Prophet Zarathustra), felt threatened by the Arab dominance and were persecuted in Iran. They were discriminated against and harassed by the Muslim rulers. Rohinton Mistry, a descendent of the Parsi Diaspora, had obvious involvement in matters Parsi, and his works reflect the insecurities of his community, desperately clinging on to their peculiar religious customs. Mistry’s fiction offers multilayered meanings—diasporic reality, Indian post coloniality, Parsi history, Representation of the nation from a subaltern perspective, Portrayal of fundamentalism in religion, etc.
INTRODUCTION

The beginning of Fundamentalism as a movement can be traced back to the late 19th century, when it was used at the Niagara Bible Conference (1878-1897) for the tenets that were considered fundamental to the Christian belief. The Oxford Dictionary defines Fundamentalism as ‘A form of religion, especially Islam or Protestant Christianity that upholds belief in the strict, literal interpretation of scripture. A Fundamentalist is defined in the Macmillan Dictionary as ‘Someone who believes that original religious and political laws should be followed very strictly and should not be changed’. The term has gathered momentum ever since with other religious groups defining their convictions - Jewish fundamentalism, Islamic fundamentalism, Hindu fundamentalism, Buddhist fundamentalism, Parsi fundamentalism, etc. The problem arises when after delimiting their precincts these groups strictly adhere to them, expecting others to appreciate and follow their methods, at times bordering on the fanatical.

Mention must be made of “atheistic fundamentalism” which means loss of faith in religion and religious practices. Fundamentalism as a term is also increasingly being used as a synonymous one for extremism of any form- market fundamentalism, economic fundamentalism, cultural fundamentalism etc. Market fundamentalism (also known as free market fundamentalism) is a pejorative term applied to a strong belief in the ability of laissez-faire or free market economy views or policies to solve economic and social problems. Economic fundamentalism offers market based solution and often breeds policy extremism. It also tends to largely gulf between economists and the wider community. Cultural fundamentalism has most popularly been linked to the equal rights amendment. It also clearly outlines the modern feminism which differed from the earlier suffragist ideology in its understanding of gender.

This paper proposes to evaluate the works of Rohinton Mistry with reference to the religious fundamentalism of the Parsis. The Parsis were originally inhabitants of Persia, modern day Iran. Persia witnessed invasions by Alexander the Great, Greeks, Arabs, Mongols and Turks. These different civilizations left their indelible mark on Persian culture. The Arab conquest of Iran in the mid 7th century drove Parsis to flee their homeland and seek asylum elsewhere. The Zoroastrians, (followers of Prophet Zarathustra), felt threatened by the Arab dominance and were persecuted in Iran. They were discriminated against and harassed by the Muslim rulers. The Muslims fundamentalists defiled the fire temples of the Zoroastrians and built Mosques in their place. A form of tax called Jizya, was imposed on them as an added measure of punishment for adhering to a different faith. Those who refused to pay the tax had to undergo further hardships in the form of imprisonment, slavery or ultimately death. Religious persecution gradually was increased to include their general behavior in society, with the ultimate aim of somehow converting them to Islam. Any form of resistance or retaliation on the part of the Zoroastrians was violently nipped in the bud by the ruthless rulers. Some could not withstand the onslaught and converted to Islam, though superficially, with the hope of being spared further ignominy. The children of such converted families had to attend Islamic schools, learn the Arabic language and follow teachings of the Quran.
The Parsis put up a brave fight against their oppressors and ultimately decided to flee their parent country to escape conversion to Islam as demanded by the Muslim fundamentalists. The Parsis too wanted to maintain purity of their race! They travelled eastwards, reaching the coasts of India, with whom they already had an established relationship by trade. They sought and were given refuge in Sanjan, Gujarat, India, provided they acceded to certain conditions. The conditions required them to lay down weapons, not proselytize, give up their language, costumes and customs in favour of those of the rulers and not inter-marry with the local population. For faithfully adhering to these conditions, they retained the right to practice their monotheistic religion – Zoroastrianism. The Qissa-e Sanjan chronicles the early history of the Parsis, their flight from Iran following the Arab conquest, up to their arrival in India. The Parsis, however, developed uneasy feelings towards their rulers, being left with no other choice.

The Parsis gradually settled down in their adopted land, taking up occupations of agriculture, trading and artisanry. The British rule in India found the Parsis acting as middlemen for the rulers. They were among the first to quickly learn the English language, producing some fine writers like Behram Malabari, Cornelia Sorabji, Fredoon Kabarji, A.F. Khabardar, C.S. Nazir, D. M. Wadia, P.P. Mehrjee and D.F. Karaka Jr. publishing short stories, novels, poems and plays. However, it is only in the later, post-Independence Parsi writers like Dina Mehta, Bapsi Sidhwa, Firdaus Kanga, Farrukh Dhondy, Boman Desai and Rohinton Mistry that an ‘ethnic atrophy’ syndrome is clearly detected.

Rohinton Mistry, a descendent of the Parsi Diaspora, had obvious involvement in matters Parsi, and his works reflect the insecurities of his community, desperately clinging on to their peculiar religious customs. Mistry’s fiction offers multilayered meanings- diasporic reality, Indian post coloniality, Parsi history, representation of the nation from a subaltern perspective, portrayal of fundamentalism in religion, etc. Nilufer Bharucha comments, “It is in such a life and death situation that the Parsis are making their last grand stand asserting their glorious Persian past, their Indian connection and their new Western experiences. All these aspects are reflected in the assertion of Parsi identity in recent fiction written by them”.

Rohinton Mistry is a Zoroastrian Parsi who migrated to Canada in 1975. He thus has an insider’s knowledge of his community’s glorious past in Iran; their subsequent forced flight to India in order to safeguard their religious interests; their willing submission to the conditions imposed by Jadav Rana; their adapting to the Indian way of life and speaking the local language (Gujarati); their near total identification with the British colonizers; the resultant feel of unease and insecurity in an Independent India; the final conscious choice to move towards the west in search of greener pastures culminating in a second Diaspora for their community. His writing stands testimony to his community’s trials and tribulations through the ages and is informed by the success stories of the few who have made it to the top in various fields and the vast majority of those who are relatively unknown and barely manage to eke out a living. These are the people focused upon in his fictional work.

Mistry’s first novel, Such a Long Journey is largely set in a Parsi housing estate, where, according to Nilufer Bharucha, “The inhabitants of Khodadad Building are representatives of a cross- section of middle class Parsis expressing all the angularities of a dwindling community.
All the characters in the novel are individualized and memorably drawn with humour and compassion.”

Avadhesh Kumar Singh observes,

“….. The novel [Such a Long Journey] as a cluster of narratives, centralizes his [Mistry’s] community as a protagonist. There is constant dialogical interaction between stories about the past and the present of the Parsi community, and Mistry like his counterparts [Firdaus Kanga, Farukh Dhondy and Bapsi Sidhwa] informs the past of his community, comments on its present and anticipates the flow of events to follow through its characters.”

In an interview with Ali Lakhani, Rohinton Mistry comments in reference to his first novel Such a Long Journey which has a Parsi milieu, “Well, I suppose it does work in that way. In a sense this novel, will, when the Parsis have disappeared from the face of the earth, will preserve a record of how they fared, to some extent.”

Parsi expressions and customs are noted in detail in all of his fictional work. Gustad Noble, the protagonist of Such a Long Journey, is described by Narendra kumar as “a pious Parsee whose life is governed by humata (good thoughts), hukhta (good words) and hvarshta (good deeds). His charitable act for the three destitute children his prayer for others at the church Mt. Mary are concrete illustrations of his probity and rectitude. Such little acts of kindness govern the best portion of his life.”

Gustad’s wife, Dilnawaz believed in the good and evil aspects preached by Zoroastrianism and was simple enough to think that the evil eye can be cast away by snapping the fingers, pointing to the door, and saying oowaryyo. concepts of good (Asha) and evil (Druj) in Zoroastrianism, which are of paramount importance in the life of a Parsi. Darius, her son, had strayed on the wrong path, caused agony and suffering to innocent creatures, for which he was now made to suffer himself “The innocent little fish and birds in his custody had no doubt cursed him with their dying breaths, and here, for all to see, was the result of their curses.” [SaLJ -43] This statement points to the same concepts mentioned above. Dilnawaz also specialized in making traditional Parsi dishes like dhansak with Kutchoomber on Sundays, dhandar – paatyo and pumpkin – buryani on other occasions which were much appreciated by her family and others.

A concept of Parsi fundamentalism informs Mistry’s thoughts and can be traced in his fiction. The presence and cultural distinctiveness of the minority Parsi community into the national space of India is always accorded prominence. In Family Matters, Inspector Masalavala, Jal and Dr. Fitter discuss this very problem.

“Just before you came, Jal,” said Inspector Masalawala, “we were chatting about the future of the Parsi community.”…” Vultures and crematoriums both will be redundant,” declared Dr. Fitter, “If there are no Parsis to feed them. What’s your opinion?”…” We’ve been a small community right from the beginning. But we’ve survived, and prospered…”…” Those were different times, a different world,” said Inspector Masalavala, not in a mood to tolerate optimism. “The experts are confident that fifty years hence, there will be no Parsis left.” [FM -412].
All the major signs of Parsi cultural identity are brought to attention. Parsi festivals such as Behram Roje Navjote, etc., institutions such as the Fire temple and the Towers of Silence and other Parsi customs are detailed - Narendra Kumar observes in Parsee Novel:

“Though Prophet Zoroaster rejected ritualism, certain rituals are central to Parsee life, since they are invested with symbolic significance. Among the rituals in Parsee life, Navjote ceremony is the most significant one. Between seven and fifteen years of age, a Parsee boy or girl has to pass through this rite of initiation formally embracing the religion of Zarathustra.”

The Navjote ceremony, therefore is of the same significance as Baptism in Christianity. In the case of Coomy and Jal, the Navjot had been performed earlier than usual, as a special consideration for Palonjji, their father, affected by Tuberculosis, who did not have much longer to live. In Such a Long Journey, Mistry’s first novel, Sohrab’s Navjot is also mentioned as an occasion to cherish and remember.

After the Navjot ceremony, the initiate is presented with the Sudreh, a spotless white shirt, and Kusti, made of lamb’s wool, tied around the waist, dividing the upper and lower parts of the body. These are the two emblems of the Zoroastrian faith. Mistry’s Such a Long Journey, befittingly begins with mentions of Ahura Mazda, and Kusti prayers and again on pages 4 and 5 the Kusti is described in detail, how Gustad felt a great peace of mind and empowered against the evils of the world. At the side of Tehmul’s dead body, Gustad repeatedly recites the Yatha Ahu Varyo and Ashene Vahoo as much for the peace of the departed soul, and all those for whom he had not shed tears, and as much for himself.

The interesting character of Dinshawji, however, has been put to better use by Mistry – he is the mouthpiece for the insecurities felt by the Parsi minority community. A few examples from the novel have been quoted as examples:

“What days those were, yaar. What fun we used to have ………. Parsis were the Kings of banking in those days. Such respect we used to get. Now the whole atmosphere only has been spoiled. Ever since that Indira nationalized the banks.” [SaLJ -38]

“Parsi crow-eaters, we’ll show you who is the boss.” [SaLJ -39]

“Wait till the Marathas take over, then we will have real Gandoo Raj….. All they know is to have rallies at Shivaji Park, shout slogans, make threats, and change road names.”[SaLJ -73]).

“That was tragic ………. Even today, people say Feroze’s heart attack was not really a heart a heart attack.” [SaLJ -197]

Farokh Kohlah in A Fine Balance, though being a quiet, peace – loving man in his later years, can also be described as a person who is very strong willed and at times even defies the dictates of religion. His final wish of a funeral in the Hindu way, would enable his family to scatter his ashes all over the mountainside, so that he would totally merge with the environment he loved so much. Charu C. Mishra observes:
“Primarily, his wish for cremation was an outraging one as his religion Zoroastrianism prescribes the disposal of dead body by feeding it to vultures. Anticipating that any left out part of his body might further defile the land, he even dares to violate the sanction of his religion.”

Mistry seizes the opportunity to comment on a very important custom of Zoroastrianism – their last act of charity, of offering their dead body to the hungry vultures – nature’s scavengers. With many Parsis having spread out to all parts of the world from their base in Gujarat and Bombay, it is becoming increasingly difficult to follow the primitive system of cremation. So as to preserve its sanctity, Mrs. Kohlah explains to her son, Maneck, how it had been difficult to find dastoors for the prayers at the time of cremation:

“How narrow – minded these people are, ‘she said, shaking her head. ‘Of course we are cremating because it was Daddy’s wish, but what about people who cannot afford to transport the body? Would these peiests deny them the prayers ?” [AFB-715]

Another Parsi belief highlighted by Mistry through the trials of Dina, in A Fine Balance, as a widow is the bad omen of getting hair cut within the premises of one’s dwelling place. Dina was in touch with her school friend, Zenobia who had become successful as a hair stylist. Zenobia taught Dina the basics of hair-cutting and advised her to visit the homes of relatives and friends to provide an easier hair-cut for their children within the comfort of their homes. This endeavour, however, proved futile, for people retaliated with:

“Madam, you have no consideration ? What have we done to you that you want to bring misfortune within our four walls ?” [AFB-72]

And again,

“Some people did offer her their children’s heads. ‘But only if you do it outside; they said. Dina refused. There were limits to what she would do. She was a in home children’s stylist, not an open – air pavement barber.’ ” [AFB-72]

These incidents bring to mind an incident from Dina’s childhood, when she had defied Nusswan and with the help of Zenobia had cut off her long plaits in school, in favour of a shorter hair style which was in fashion. Nusswan had retaliated in quite a similar manner :

“I don’t want another word from you…. Take a bath first, you polluted creature ! Wash off those hair clippings before you spread them around the house and bring misfortune upon us!” [AFB-28]

Significant symbolic religious fundamentalism in Yezad- he has turned very orthodox in his religious practices. Yezad’s character has undergone a complete transformation under Mistry’s pen - from a very rational, down-to-earth character he becomes a religious fanatic. At one time he had nurtured hopes and made concrete efforts to migrate to Canada. In Mistry’s third novel, Family Matters, Yezad is shown to be a non-believer of rituals and feels

“going to the fire-temple on Navroze and Khardad Sal was enough for him, and loban smoke was merely one way to get rid of mosquitoes. “[FM 25]
When Nariman is brought to Yezad’s house with a broken ankle, without any previous intimation by Coomy and Jal, he finds it rather difficult to provide for the extra expenses. He is gradually found making his way to the fire temple in search of solace. Roxana is happy at first to see this change in Yezad but his inclination towards religion soon borders on the extreme, and soon assumes fanatical overtones, making life uneasy for those around. The bookshelves in the bedroom are filled with ‘Volumes of Parsi History and Zoroastrianism, “Various translations of the Zend-Avesta, … “[FM 463]

The change in Yezad is slow, but sure and complete. He has turned very orthodox in his religious practices. He does not work anymore. The investments from the proceedings of the sale of the flat keep the household going. Yezad has cordoned off an area in the dressing room solely for his religious practices. Roxana is not allowed entry into that area or kitchen during her menstrual cycle. He has joined ‘The League of Orthodox Parsis and the Association for Zarathustrian Education” [FM 466]. He keeps having arguments with his elder son Murad who calls him a bigot, like Hitler, in reaction to Yezad’s assertion “Because we are a pure Persian race, a unique contribution to this planet, and mixed marriages will destroy that”. [FM 483] Ironically enough Murad has been found to be dating a non-Parsi girl, which Yezad has taken a strong objection to.

The Epilogue details many customs of the Parsi community, Murad’s eighteenth birthday celebrated twice – one on the Parsi roj, according to the Zoroastrian calender, and the other according to the English calender. All details, right down to the floor decorated with a fish motif in white chalk, Murad being presented with the symbols of good luck and prosperity : betel leaves and betel – nuts, dates, flowers, a coconut’ [FM 497], vermilion teelo applied on the forehead, etc. are meticulously provided by Mistry. Roxana sees to it that Murad’s eighteenth birthday is celebrated in traditional Parsi style along with Parsi sweets – Sooterfeni, burfi, malai-na-khaja, from the Parsi dairy farm.

Mistry seems to be laughing at Nusswan in A Fine Balance for his religious absurdities, as if to say, smearing the holy ashes over the body will only make him believe that he is being purified – but would it, really?

Dina finds the whole exercise ludicrous:

“While she bowed before the sanctum, he travelled along the outer wall hung with pictures of various dustoors and high priests. He glided from display to display, stroking the garlands, hugging the frames, kissing the glass, and ending with the very tall picture of Zarathustra to which he glued his lips for a full minute. Then, from the vessel of ashes placed in the sanctum’s doorway, he smeared a pinch on his forehead, another bit across the throat, and undid his top two shirt buttons to rub a fistful over his chest. Like talcum powder, thought Dina.” [AFB-24]

Misty’s concern about his dwindling Parsi community is voiced in his interview with Dirk Bennet:
“There are only 120,000 Parsees in the world. So it is not a threat or delusion that they are on the verge of disappearance. What is 60,000 in a city (Bombay) of 12 million? And it is a pity when anything disappears from this world, any species, man, animal or insect.”

This genuine concern of Mistry is found in his creation of characters like Jal in Family Matters and Tehmul Lungraa in Such a Larg Journey. Both these characters are weak, indecisive, adult males, unmarried and more importantly, unassertive. They easily allow themselves to be ruled over. N. P. Sharma aptly describes this condition:

“The centuries of suffering, segregation and loneliness have brought the to a vision of life where nothing is amiss and perhaps this is how they are ready even for their extinction.”

Another point worth mentioning here is the discussion/argument that takes place between Dinshawji and Gustad on the matter of changing/renameing various roads, streets and squares. Gustad taking a tolerant stand finds nothing wrong in it if it keeps the authorities (Marathas) happy. Dinshawji, however, is much agitated and believes in the permanency of things and feels a sense of insecurity.

“Why change the names? … Hutatma chowk! … What is wrong with Flora Fountain? … No, Gustad … you are wrong. Names are so important. I grew up on Lamingten Road. But it has disappeared, in its place is Dadasaheb Bhadkhamkar Marg. My school was on Carnac Road. Now suddenly it’s on Lokmanya Tilak Marg. I live at Sleater Road, soon that will also disappear. My whole life I have come to work at Flora fountain. So what happens to the life I have lived? was I living the wrong life, with all the wrong names? Will I get a second chance to live if all again, with these new names? Tell me what happens to my life. Rubbed out, just like that? Tell me!” [SaLJ-73, 74].

Shiv Sena fanaticism is evident when the fabric of the nation is violently ripped apart post Babri Masjid episode. Bomb blasts rocked Bombay. In the present novel, it has references to the renewed animosity between Hindus and Muslims post Babri Masjid episode. References are made to an incident, when “The goondas who assumed Muslims were hiding in Dalal Estate and set fire to it?” [FM - 4].

A statement of Mr. Kapur proves to be strangely prophetic – he is murdered by a couple of Shiv Sainiks in his own shop, for having abused two of their colleagues who had demanded that he change the name of his shop from Bombay to Mumbai. Mr. Kapur had offered to pay money to retain Bombay, but they had been unrelenting, resulting in Mr. Kapur’s pushing them out of his shop, with a lot of abuses. This murder of Mr. Kapur after his proclamation of not hesitating to lay down his life for Bombay if the need arose is very significant.

Gustad (Mistry’s) attitude is in keeping with the Parsi world view of religious tolerance but Nilufer Bharuchha feels this is an attitude typical of Bombay:

“So, the wall of all Religions comes into existence and re-affirms Bombay’s famed tolerance in The face of increased fundamentalism violence… uncertain being the key word for Bombay’s minorities, religions and linguistic in a city in the clutches of a political and criminal mafia.”
In his first novel, Such a Long Journey, we have Mistry’s voice through the pavement artist’s underlining another tenet of Zoroastrianism – the Zoroastrian World view which implies that,

“A true Parsee should be tolerant about the faiths and beliefs of others. Zoroastrianism makes them sociable with the other sister communities of India.” Narendra kumar

The pavement artist (Mistry?) says :

“There is no difficulty… using assorted religious and their gods, saints and prophets : Hindu, Sikh, Judaic, Christian, Muslim, Zoroastrian, Buddhist, Jainist. Actually, Hinduism alone can provide enough. But I always like to mix them up, include a variety in my drawings. Makes me feel I am doing something to promote tolerance and understanding in the world”.[SaLJ -182]

The reader wonders whether it is Mr. Kapur, in Family Matters, who is in awe of the pictures of Bombay or Mistry indulging in fond memories of a city constantly changing and evolving. As the novel progresses, we have visions of a mature Mr. Kapur (Mistry) redefining his vision of the present day Bombay, equating it to the all – embracing principles of Hinduism.

“Remember I said Bombay is like a religion ? Well, it’s like Hinduism. I think.” …

“Hinduism has an all-accepting nature, agreed ? I’m not talking about fundamentalists, mosque –destroying fanatics, but the real Hinduism has nurtured this country for thousands of years, welcoming all creeds and beliefs and dogmas and theologies, making them feel at home …”.

Mistry’s novels, thus seem to be a balancing between various dichotomies- liberalism& Fundamentalism, Macracosm & Microcosm, Upper Caste & Lower Caste, Society & Individual, Ruler & Ruled, Male & Female, a flicker of hope among dismal circumstances.

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The works of Rohinton Mistry


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