



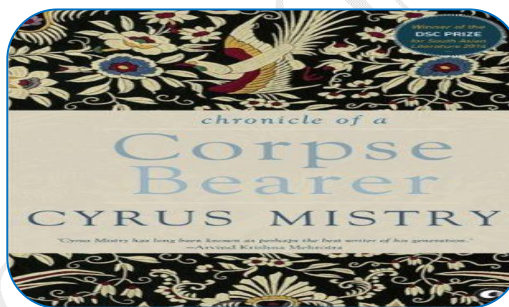
## AN ALIEN IN ONE'S OWN WORLD: A STUDY ON CYRUS MISTRY'S *CHRONICLE OF A CORPSE BEARER*.

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### ABSTRACT :

Cyrus Mistry is one among the notable writers in our country who conjures up the nearly invisible lives around him in his letters of merit. The much discussed DSC prize winning novel *The Chronicles of a Corpse Bearer* discusses the lives and times of the most humiliated and marginalized corpse bearing class in the miniscule society of Parsis. Khandias as they were called is treated out to be a sub-caste in the Parsi community entrusted with the job of the keepers of purity. They mediate between the dead and living ones by carrying the corpse to the lush grounds of Towers of Silence, for the job which they were treated as the god of unclean and source of contamination there by forbidden from normal interaction with the rest of the community. The present paper analyses the lives of the Khandias presented by Mistry on the subaltern paradigm.



**KEYWORDS :** Marginalization , Subaltern , Khandias , Purity.

### INTRODUCTION :

Parsi writing in English especially after independence is ethnocentric. The literature produced by Parsi writers is characterized by both ethnocentric and minority discourse features. It depicts all the concerns of the modern day Parsis. The literature produced by the writers is community specific. The Parsi writers through their works intend to preserve their ethnicity for ages to come. Hence creative writing is one of the media for them for the purpose. V.L.V.N.Narendrakumar aptly puts it:

"Parsi novel in English, i.e. novel portraying Parsi life, is a potent index of the Zoroastrian ethos. It voices the ambivalence, the nostalgia and the dilemma of the endangered Parsee community. In Parsee novel in English the 'operative sensibility' is Zoroastrian. The Parsi novelists have forged a dialect, which has a distinct ethnic character...Besides being innovative the Parsee novelists describe in detail, the esoteric rituals, and the Zoroastrian customs such as Navjote. Thus Parsi novel in English gives a peep into the turbulent Parsee mind of today."(Dodiya 27)

Being the miniscule minority in India, the Parsis do experience ethnic anxiety; they feel insecure, experience identity crisis and feel threatened by possible submersion in the dominant Hindu culture, a nightmarish prospect which they do not ever want to come true. Cyrus Mistry's books portray diverse facets of Indian socio-economic life, as well as Parsi-Zoroastrian life, customs and religion. His works propose to look at the anguish Parsi way of life wrapped up in thick coverings of Parsi ethnicity with the essence of Parsi spirit.

Parsis had contributed much to the economy, politics and society of India and proved themselves an example for the rich society of India. Many things disturb the Parsi community: declining population, late marriages, low birth rate, high rate of divorce, attitudes to the girl child, urbanization, alienation etc. are some of them. All these issues find expression in the post independence Parsi writing in English. As a chronicler of Parsi Community, Mistry is keenly aware of his Community's predicament. Like his short stories, Mistry's multi layered novel is about power and powerlessness, about the need for community in which the individual's voice is not muffled. Like other Parsi writers, Mistry's work is guided by the experience of double displacement. As a Parsi, Mistry finds himself at the margins of Indian society and hence his writing challenges and resists absorption by the dominating and Hindu-glorifying culture of India. He has experimented with linguistic hybridity and celebrates the use of Parsi language. He focuses on the human condition, location in time and space, and the Parsi middle class in Suburban Bombay and rural migrants. The feeling of being left out of the cultural mainstream is uniquely reflected in the way Mistry's characters are displaced.

Mistry's portrayal of the near invisible community of Parsi corpse bearers is the most engaging aspect of the novel. Khandias or the nussesalars are a group of subaltern within the Parsi community. They were moved to margins by the dominant section of the community. Within the multi-layered structure of his novel, Mistry carefully weaves the key issues of the corpse bearing community. Strictly speaking, they experience double marginalization- first by the main stream society of India and second by the community itself. This marginalized community is seen as the "untouchable", "god of unclean", and "sources of contamination", who are forbidden from normal interaction with others'. All the rituals relating to dead bodies are rigorously and unfailingly maintained by the Khandias and nussesalars. The Khandias were employed for preserving the purity.

In the novel Phiroze's work is not only tedious but also contemptuous. As he says "I don't meant the physical strain that can be rough, no doubt- so much as the contempt and abuse we receive for doing a job no one else will touch"(CCB 12). They are allotted small quarters to reside inside the premises of Towers of Silence. Mistry throws light on the wretched plight of this most humiliated, isolated, segregated, and deprived so called untouchable sub-caste of the Parsi community in the novel. Naturally the poor downtrodden people of Parsi community seek the job of Khandia for their livelihood and safe living quarters. But for such a safe zone they have to remain a pariah, completely moved to the margins of a nearly small community. The physical strain which they undertook in order to cope up with the hard living condition is rough. There are thirteen Khandias in total, and a hearse driver Jungoo. There is only one hearse for corpse carrying. The hearse almost all the time lays defunct. Then these Khandias are to carry the human carcasses along with the solid heavy iron bier weighing nearly eight pounds on their shoulder all the way to the Towers of Silence from the mournful family. During the carriage of corpses they do not even get a single minute to take rest or drink.

The Khandias are perennially oppressed and deprived of their due wages, incommensurate with their back-breaking hard aching labors, by the Parsi Panchayet Trustee. They are actually very poor. They cannot meet both the ends together-"from week to week even day to day." They are to work almost whole day without overtime compensation and without any leave. The hope for amelioration signifies the ability to cross over to a better state. The Khandias have none. Caste boundaries cannot be traversed. Born into the supposed piety of delivering the final honour to the dead, the Khandias are the slaves to their fate.

Nevertheless, the strict caste order violates its own notion of boundary maintenance. The binary of "social climbing and social sinking" has been enacted by Rustom and his daughter, Vera. Rustom was not born into the Khandia profession. The death of his father and the coldness of his uncle left him to fend for himself. He embraced social sinking by resorting to the profession of a corpse bearer. Vera, refusing to be restrained by her birth station, educated herself to be qualified for a job at Gagrat, Limbuwala & Co, and took residence at a flat at Malabar Hill. She falls in love with the Limbuwala scion, Shapoor, only to be rejected for her social berth. Her attempt at social climbing gives a fleeting glimpse of life outside the Tower of Silence, only to be disillusioned in the form of a heartbreak and forced resignation. The Parsi community

relies on Khandias for purification of their dead. They thus form the figurative and literal base of the society. Though the corpse bearers do such an important work, they are treated abusively and contemptuously by the other Parsis of the society. They always almost fall prey to humiliation due to the slightest encroachment upon the other's jurisdiction. Khandias must perform the rituals of self-purification on daily basis if they are to interact with others, but often they do not venture out of their claustrophobic living quarters at Doongerwadi atop the Malabar hills. The need to assert one's rights is contagious. A petition is drafted, rights are demanded, and a revolt has begun.

The first release from the shackles of caste oppression comes through the burial of Joseph Maloney's body. The Parsi Panchayet had been the conductor of Zoroastrian religion for long. After the protest, the Khandias awaken to their rightful position as equal keepers of their faith. The devout followers, Buchia, Farokh, Fali, Jungoo, Shiavux and Homiar decide to take a stand against the Panchayet's permit for Joseph's Zoroastrian funeral. They kidnap his body from Doongerwadi and give him an unceremonious Christian funeral. Beyond the frontiers of an ostracized, neglected community, this act asserts their place in their own faith. Mistry presents the dogmatic religious beliefs and its contradictions. All the rules and regulations which existed within the community create a class divide. The religious texts simultaneously take the Khandias as both the keepers of unclean and as untouchables. In the moral world, virtue has its own reward, and vice its own punishment. Virtue has all happiness and pleasure in the long run, and vice all misery and grief. From a Zoroastrian point of view, the consideration of these facts presents strong evidence for the existence of a future state of life, and for the immortality of the soul. But the reality of the downtrodden section of the society is quite different from that of the scripture and from the popular Parsi beliefs. Even though the Parsi corpse bearers embody the element of virtue and simplicity to the core, they all have to face and suffer in the long run both aversion from the society and marginality. They were deprived of a good and comfortable life, when this situation is analysed in comparison with the other members of the community, their life inside the secluded Doongerwadi can be treated as a kind of excommunication from the main stream Parsi life. But at the same time, the Panchayet and its bureaucratic officials, who act as the slave masters of Doongerwadi, enjoy all sorts of material life. Within the knowledge of being an untouchable, Phiroze shows the courage to assert his status as a nussesalar in the wretched system as a "glorified untouchable."

The course of the novel focusses on the protagonist's life in a very traditional and secluded community, which in time, slowly begins to undergo change while on the other side India is rapidly changing, moving from the end of its colonial period into independence and later on to the modern era. Phiroze always walked aloof from the moral life that is prescribed by his religion, during his day outs in the youthful days. To a certain extent this decision was a resistance or can be called a silent rebellion against the overdose of morality and righteous living that he has been enforced at home. He chose the seedier segments of the inner city and the outskirts for this kind of a self exploration. He himself explains that he chose the places where no self respecting Parsi would be spotted out-slums, shanty towns, areas in which low life and sin and poverty flourished. But to him he deliberately sought out these very areas and activities- "if only to find out to what extent indulgence in vice was truly pleasurable, and if it really resulted in the dreadful aftermath so often dedicated" (CCB 69). But after his encounter with Seppy he is tied to true love and adhered to a new way of life. Nowhere could we find that Phiroze regrets his decision to become a Khandia. He is totally devoted to the profession which he adorned, even after Sepideh's death. Phiroze is not alone in bearing the contempt which high class Parsi people have for Khandias, but his fellow corpse bearers Fali, Temoo, Boman etc. are also the victims of injustice. They are underpaid and if they make any mistakes, their job is under the disposal of people such as Buchia and Coyaji. These people possess a contemptuous outlook and never show any sort of sympathy or empathy towards them.

Society has decreed that the downtrodden are never to rise. The ruling caste is mindful and deliberate in maintaining the caste border. This stringent caste consciousness takes the anachronistic form of untouchability. During his childhood, Phiroze had witnessed his father's fastidious order to have the temple's gate cleaned when Rudabeh had leaned against it. Years later, Phiroze finds himself the culprit

when he “desecrate(s)” a man by accidentally grazing his shin against the man’s “polished smooth shoe” (CCB 23). The gathering of mourners look on as the man castigates Phiroze for his impudent act. The spectators are jarred by the very sight, implying their ingrained, age old tradition of untouchability. The incident is also marked by Phiroze’s will to revolt and the sheer impossibility of doing so. The formidable boundary keeps him away from voicing his contempt and scorning the injustice. The internal conflict is experienced through his urge to laugh which evades him from his childhood, when he happened to be confronted with religious piety which was represented by his father Framroz and to which his mother Hilla had adhered to. He muses, “The mere knowledge that a part of me is telling me to restrain myself is enough to unfasten the lid on my irreverence” (CCB 45). In practice, however, he must bow down to the offended and apologize for having grazed the caste border. Such an action is the result of the internalization of the caste doctrines. Phiroze learns and internalizes the ways of Khandias. Thus when the affluent Rohinton embraces the untouchable Phiroze, Phiroze is gripped with shock. He immediately suggests the remedy “better have a thorough bath once you get home” (CCB 191).

Restrained within the bounds of the caste of untouchable, Phiroze is even denied of the right to sit by the side of his mother, when she is in her deathbed suffering from cancer. Neither his religious father Framroz nor his brother Vispy inform him about it. When he takes part in the final purification ceremony of his mother, he can not sit with his father and brother to share the same benches to mourn the death. Instead he has to sit on the separate chair which is provided by Temoorus. Even the death scenes became not at all removed from the strong caste fanaticism. The son is completely denied of being with his mournful family, for his impudent act of being married off to a Khandia’s daughter and thereby shattering and questioning the religious beliefs of his family. This incident alone is sufficient to shed light on the immaculate fate of the protagonist, Phiroze Elchidana.

Temoorus, formerly a known profligate, who later married Rudabeh, is not born an untouchable. Same is the case with Phiroze, even though born to a high Parsi family, by the marriage relation with a Khandia’s daughter determined his down fall. Kobbad, another member of the corpse bearers, is the son of a small trader who moved to Mumbai to improve his fortunes by trading. But by the irony of fate, after his father’s unexpected demise under the ferocious feet of a mad bull, he has to take up the job of corpse bearing and reside at the quarters allotted for the Khandias at the enclosed premises of the Towers of Silence. Rustom, the most senior member in the group of the Khandias, lost his father, mother and sister, took to streets as his living place. But with the help of a worker at the Parsi Panchayet, he gets the job of a Khandia, which marks that, the untouchability which existed within the Parsi community is not only transmitted from one generation to the other but also inflicted the torment of exclusion and isolation upon those who take up the profession.

## CONCLUSION:

The novel turns light on the wretched plight of this most humiliated, isolated, segregated and deprived so-called untouchable sub-caste of the Parsi community. The Khandias are forbidden from normal interaction with others and apparently form a social life. Even at the time of the Independence movement and thereafter the leaders of the new age completely ignored the presence of Khandias. The religious dictums entrusted them with the most important duty to preserve the purity by mediate between the life and filth of death. To do such kind of a rough and strenuous job they were completely moved off to the margins. For an escape from the cycle of rebirths they have to toil within the lush grounds of the Towers of Silence. Certainly *Chronicle of a Corpse bearer* is a heart rending story of injustice faced by a minority within a community that itself is a minority.

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