Celebrating Urdu Poetry (which contains his translations of Urdu poetry, something he has done on and off over the years), and *The Khushwant Singh Treasury* (which is a collection of his favourite prayers, poems and proverbs). The latter typically mixes Shakespeare sonnets with anonymous contributions:

The sexual life of the camel
Is stranger than anyone thinks
In the heat of passion
He tries to bugger the Sphinx.
But the Sphinx's rear orifice
Is full of the sand of the Nile
Which explains the hump on the camel
And the Sphinx's mysterious smile.

As I finished my second drink, the blue-suited Sikh, evidently on the hunt for yet another interview of the great man, moved in on Khushwant. But Lady Luck was not with him. With a noticeable scowl, Khushwant said, "Enough now, this *buddha* needs his rest. So goodnight." I shook his hand, thanked him for his courtesy, waved at Rahul and got out of the door along with the rest of the crowd.

Should I take a three-wheeler back to the IIC, I asked myself. I shuddered, but not due to the Delhi cold. A brisk walk would do me no harm. Pulling my muffler tighter across my throat, I set off, past the apartment complex gates, onto the footpath, and into the wide, grinning night.

BOOK NOTES

Chronicle of a Corpse Bearer

Waqar Ahmed

Cyrus Mistry's *Chronicle of a Corpse Bearer,* which won this year's prestigious DSC Prize for South Asian Literature, documents the lives of the untouchable subsection of India's Parsi community. In so doing, it gives voice to a segregated part of Parsi society not covered by leading (Indian) Zoroastrian writers such as Rohinton Mistry and Thrity Umrigar.

At the outset of the novel, it appears the protagonist, Phiroze Elchidana, will serve as liberator of the khandia corpse-bearing class. The son of a Parsi high priest, he is disowned by his family for marrying the daughter of a khandia. Once he becomes a nussesalar (an exalted, but still banished khandia), he leads his fellow corpse-bearers in the only recorded strike against the Parsi high bureaucracy. Late in the novel, Phiroze tries to persuade his father to bless the burial of a half-Zoroastrian family member of a friend, something not permitted by the religion.

Yet every one of Phiroze's rebellious steps is met with tragedy. His khandia wife dies by cobra bite not many years after their marriage. The benefits from his strike are annulled because he foolishly forgets to cement the agreements in writing. And the first signs of rapprochement with his father are extinguished once Phiroze proposes blessing the half-Zoroastrian.

Chronicle, originally tabbed to be a documentary, is based on the true story of a Parsi dock worker who falls in love with a khandia, becomes a corpse bearer, and leads a strike against the Parsi Punchayet. Though the novel's storylines are based on factual events, one senses they were useful in contributing to the larger message: The need for the Parsi community to reform its cultural tenets, many of which, such as the treatment of khandias, are not even rooted in the religion.

The great strength of Mistry's novel lies in the first hundred pages where descriptions of khandia and temple life carry the reader through the rest of the plot. There is a magnificent scene at the beginning of *Chronicle* where we find Phiroze carrying a body with his fellow-corpse bearers, through traffic and nationalist protests, to the Towers of Silence where it will decompose and be eaten by vultures. Unique details related to the burial process abound in the novel:

"Before modern medicine reserved that right for itself, it was canines that were believed to have an uncanny ability to sniff out the slightest flicker of vitality persisting in a body presumed dead. Hence, not once, but thrice in the course of the funerary ceremonies my Moti is brought before the corpse. Invariably though, after no more than a moment's hesitation, she wrinkles her snout and looks away."

If there is a flaw in *Chronicle*, it is the uneven tone of the writing and, at times, the dialogue. For the most part, Mistry employs a minimalist style that is peppered with appropriate Hindi words. But in certain passages, the prose veers towards academic writing:

"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."

Mistry's Anglo-Indian dialogue is crisp at the beginning of the novel, but starts to falter, and the use of American idiomatic expressions ("we corpse bearers stuck to our guns") and words like "cakewalk" and "desperado" – which don't have clear equivalents in Hindi or other dialects spoken by the Parsis of India – begin to creep into the prose.

At the conclusion of *Chronicle*, we learn that modernity is also to blame for some of the inauspicious changes to Zoroastrianism in India. A retired Phiroze laments that high-rises have been erected around the Towers of Silence and vultures, once an integral part of the burial ritual, have become extinct, replaced by solar powered receptors now used to hasten the decomposition of corpses. These are bleak developments which suggest that even if structural reforms were made to "open up" aspects of Zoroastrianism, the thrust of modernity will continue to play its part in transforming the diaspora permanently.

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