

Chapter – 2

The Path of Zarathustra:

India's Take on Magic Realism on Screen

The 2015 Indian film *The Path of Zarathustra* directed by Oorvazi Irani and starring Oorvani Irani, Rushad Rana and Tom Alter, is a film based on the minority Parsi community in India. Despite being a magic realist film, it reaches out to the global audience rather than being limited in its approach to India, to the Parsi community or the Zoroastrian faith. When watching the film for the first time, the viewer needs to focus on the film, attentively to understand its premise and message. Though, the film explains the basic principles of the Zoroastrian faith yet it leaves the viewers with enough questions which intrigues and urges them to learn about the faith in more detail from, other sources. By gaining some knowledge about the faith and then watching the film again will render the film in a new light, such is the beauty of a magic realist film.

The Parsees have a diasporic heritage. They left Persia, the present day Iran, in order to avoid persecution from the Muslim invaders around the time of the Muslim conquest of the Persian Empire, around 651 centuries A.D which led to the eventual decline of the Zoroastrian religion. Around the 7-8th century A.D. These Zoroastrian refugees carrying their sacred fire reached Sanjan, modern day Gujrat; where they sought refuge and settlement there from the liberal king of Sanjan, king Jadhav. After hearing their woes and perils as well as of the basic principles of Zoroastrians from their Dastur or priest, was impressed. He allowed them to settle there on few conditions of adopting the local Gujrati language, handing over their weapons, women to wear sari, the local costume; to respect the cow and marriage ceremonies to be done at night; to avoid

conversions. The Zoroastrians faithfully accepted these conditions on the promise of them being able to practice their religion freely and to bring up their children in their own traditions. In the contemporary period these conditions which have become a part of their tradition. Scholar Rekha Nagwanshi states that 2001 Indian Census Report shows Gujarati as the mother tongue of Parsees, who now have forgotten their original traditional dialects. The film uses Gujarati Zoroastrian language besides the dominant English, the terms “mamawaji” and “sheera masi” are Parsee Gujarati terms for maternal grandfather and maternal aunt. The Sindhi sari is adopted as the communal wear by the Parsi women, worn in the Sindhi fashion, which the protagonist is seen wearing in the film. Traditional Parsees still do not eat beef even although it’s not a religious taboo to eat pork or beef and Parsi marriages still happen at night.

The community in India is tiny yet it does not allow conversions and non Parsees are not allowed inside their places of worship i. e. the Fire Temples or Agiyaries and the Tower of Silence, where their funeral rituals happen explains Adi K. Sahukar. This is one of the main causes of ignorance regarding the Parsi Zoroastrian religion and culture. The adaptive spirit of the Indian Parsees enables this minority community’s survival in such a culturally and religiously diverse country like India. The religion the Parsees of India follow is Zoroastrianism, one of the most ancient, monotheist religions in the world. There are 19 million followers of Zoroastrianism globally; most of them reside in Iran and India hence they can be roughly categorised into two groups Iranian Zoroastrians and Parsi Zoroastrians [Indian Zoroastrians]. In the present day many Zoroastrians have emigrated to U.S.A, Canada and Britain in search of better lifestyle, better educational and employment opportunities.

The Prophet Zarathustra’s Greek name is Zoroaster on which the faith is called Zoroastrianism and on whose teachings the faith is based. Zoroaster believed in one supreme

creator of the universe, *Ahura Mazda*; who imparted him wisdom in a vision. Zarathustra preached the monotheist religion of one supreme, neutral, formless and transcendental God. His message is a positive and active; based on actions and reasons of an individual rather than staunch belief. According to Zoroastrianism the universe is dominated by two primal forces of Good and Evil. The conflict between good and evil will continue until evil is defeated after which there will be a resurrection, a final judgement and then an endless era of peace. It believes in the inborn goodness of the human nature unlike old Middle Eastern belief of the inherent baseness of human nature.

Life is viewed as a classless struggle between the forces of good and evil and humanity has the free will to choose to follow the path of good or evil. Zoroastrianism has no concept of ascetics, physical flagellation, fasting, earthly renunciation or celibacy. It believes in a comfortable way of living explains Parsi religious scholar Khojeste Mistree. He adds that it's encourages capitalism but emphasizes on social responsibility hence the wealth accumulated must be distributed evenly within the community. The principle moral ethic of Zoroastrianism is "Hvarshta, Hukhta, Humanta" (*The Path of Zarathustra* n.p) means good deeds, good words and good thoughts; humanity should follow its path. Zoroastrianism advocates free will and believes that the power of humanity lies in its choice to follow path of good or evil and thereby influence one's own and the humanity's fate and the ultimate destination of humanity is oneness with the supreme creator. The film emphasizes on human's free will to follow their faith. It advocates truth and honesty which is the feeling this film gives out to the audience. The magic realist films focus on the deliberate choices of the Anglo- native protagonist depicting their duality, latent in the contemporary culture. It presents the character's transcendence of boundaries, of ideology and identity showing the protagonists hybrid ideology.

Zoroastrianism is natively called *Mazdayasna*. Its main religious text is the *Avesta* and other texts are the *Yasna* and the *Vendidad*. The basic ethics or moral principles of the faith are to follow the path of Truth, to do the right thing and belief in only one universal, supreme God but the most important one is of having “Good Thoughts, Good Deeds and Good Words” (The *Path of Zarathustra* n.p); thereby renewing the world and leading it towards perfection. There are no major theological divisions within Zoroastrianism but the changes in the modern era has influenced the values, practices, vocabulary and beliefs of individuals often merging with other traditions or displacing them. For example, nowadays even Parsi weddings have a mehndi ceremony which is not traditionally a part of Parsi weddings. Manichaeism was a form of Zoroastrianism which was quite popular in the late antiquity of the Sasanian Empire before the rise of Islam there. Its only difference from Mazdaism, the contemporary form of Zoroastrianism is that its teachings were based on dualistic cosmology and gnostic religion believing in abstinence, celibacy and philanthropy. Manichaeism is now extinct. Manichaeism is mentioned in film in form of the character of Mani representing the prophet Mani on whose teachings this religion was based. In the film and in real history the prophet Mani was executed for peaching a false religion when the orthodox form of Zoroastrianism, was dominant.

Magic realist films understand identity as hybrid and transnational. The plots, symbols and events of these films go beyond the one dimensional depiction which cinema is criticised of being. Magic realist cinema explores culture and subverts stereotypes. Critic Noelia Fernández asserts that such films are an original mix of two artistic realities. A kind of pluralism is latent in such films which sustains heterogeneity and cultural diversity. The hybrid urban space is constantly changing, in which multiple layers of reality crystallise is represented by the magical in the magic realist mode says critic Edward Soja. The contemporary Parsi speaks Gujrati, Hindi and English

equally well and attends pluralistic schools now, though Parsi children still attend religious classes at their community's Fire Temples or *Agiyaries*. Most of India's Parsees reside in Mumbai. Parsi comedian Cyrus Broacha says that for most Parsees in Mumbai this is their hometown, they do not have any homeland to go back to. This diasporic community has adapted itself well within the Indian culture but starting a new life does not mean having a new beginning as the beginning lies in the past heritage; at some point in one's life one has to address one's beginning as the present is built on the past. These facts lead to the inherent confusion and ambivalence of the identity and tradition of modern Parsi Zoroastrians. Many want to escape this dilemma by emigrating and becoming completely westernised; others want to retain their roots and essence of their traditions by carrying on their traditional rituals and celebrations like *Navjote*, the Parsi rite of initiation. During the British colonial rule, the Parsees enjoyed a good position and soon became the most westernised of all communities of India. They served as the business agents between the British and the locals of India, helped the British in communication. Though they adopted many of the British customs and costumes yet their essential beliefs and outlook towards life remained essentially Zoroastrian. They celebrated all the Zoroastrian festivals like the Zoroastrian New Year and the rituals like *Navjote*, etc. The Parsi life was westernisation externally not internally.

The film gives brief insights into the Parsi rituals like the scene of a *Navjote* rite, the official initiation of a child into the Zoroastrian faith and a funeral; these give the film a distinct Parsi cultural outlook including the scenes at the Fire Temple. Filming at a Fire Temple was probably been done for the first time, despite these. This is not a religious film asserts Oorvazi Irani. The spiritual framework, fantastical scenes and universal appeal to search for one's true self makes it appealing to all, regardless of being a Parsi or not. The main aim of a magic realist film is to gather together and connect a diverse variety of audience across the globe on the same platform on the

same issues and on the same level. Perhaps this is the reason Oorvazi Irani chose to make a magic realist movie, instead of a documentary focusing on the Parsi community of India. The film tries to deconstruct the postcolonial, diasporic and postmodern identity of a Parsi Zoroastrian and find their true faith and identity, such an endeavour transcends the limitations of labels and links to humanity on a greater level. These are dilemmas the people who went through the experience of colonialism and post colonialism, all over the world.

The film shows the relation of the individual with their community and how they are joined together through rituals, festivals and social practices. Rekha Nagwanshi claims that communities try to maintain a unique identity of their own through ethnic rituals especially in diasporic communities. The film explores the struggles and behaviour of this community trying to maintain its faith and identity. The westernised value system that the contemporary Parsi Zoroastrians follow is unable to maintain their community life and Faith's vision. The Zoroastrian faith is mysterious, having an interesting and intriguing history states *shaivikafunda* blogpost. This implies that in the modern world where information is available on the go the Parsees remain a closed community, whose basic tenets and rituals remain shrouded in darkness. The community itself is helping the ignorance by denying access to their places of worship and rituals like the Towers of Silence to all non Parsees. Oorvazi Irani explains that the film is a journey towards the roots of the faith itself, along with questioning of and finding answers which all human being do at some point of their lives. This helps her find her own identity, being a part of the Zoroastrian faith. She feels it's her duty as an artist to contribute something, to ask such essential yet radical questions on behalf of the common people. Perhaps, using the form of magic realism made this film more acceptable and appealing to the public. She knew it was a radical, path breaking and a serious film aiming at a burning issue, maybe not within the whole arena of the Bollywood but in

Mumbai where the orthodox Zoroastrians have a stronghold. She feared that such a film will not be well received by the audience and such a film will not be allowed or supported to be released in the theatres of metropolitan cities. Despite her worries the film was well supported by PVR a well-known brand of Cineplex and many industry insiders. The film was well received by the audience who were able to get the message she was trying to spread. It would have been hard to be able to produce and release such a complex and religiously radical film in India, especially in Mumbai. Employing a magic realist narrative had cloaked its radical affect. Magic realism simplifies, smoothens and presents the radical matter in such a way that it's acceptable, appealing and palatable to the common audience across the world. The film has a mysterious element, the book and its interpreter which gets revealed in a beautiful yet ambiguous way, a trait which makes magic realist films universally appealing. Oorvazi Irani feared if this film could be released at all or not or will it be censored. But the use of the form of magic realism allowed her film to be released in major cities like Mumbai, Delhi- NCR, Ahmedabad and Bengaluru, having a rating of Universal from the Central Board of Film Certification, India.

The film explores the issue of identity through the fictional, personal and spiritual quest of a Parsi woman and concludes that one's faith is a very personal thing and all faith have the same basic principle which is to love each other. Hence the tag line of the film "does every search for god end in love?" (*The Path of Zarathustra* n.p). Tom Alter, the actor who plays the grandfather in the film in his conversation with Oorvazi Irani in the bonus track of the film's DVD, feels that the film is a personal take on religion, it's a love story of the character of Oorvazi with her grandfather, her cousin Perseus, her faith, her traditions, the real world and she shows this through her questions, gestures and conversations with these things. Oorvazi the character in the film, in the scene at the turbulent sea shore states that a life is not lived truly, if one does not ask oneself

that why was he/ she put on this earth. She emphasizes that it's not important to get all the answers but searching for them and asking questions is essential. This perhaps implies that one should not follow one's religion with blind faith but with reason. The scene at the sea shore, reading her grandfather's book focuses on the violently clashing waves on the rocks, the noise of the turbulent waves and then moves onto the protagonist. The clashing of the waves reflects the clashing of her own understanding of her faith which she gained by reading the book herself, her self-interpretation clashing with the ideas traditionally inbred in her mind. For instance, she was passed down the idea that Mazdak, the prophet was a heretic and immoral, he proposed that women should be common property but the film explains that he reminded others that *Ahura Mazda*, their God believes in classless society and equality. He asserted that woman being the property of one man is wrong and there should be no weak or powerful, questioning the authority and power of the high priests. His radical ideas were suppressed to protect the power of the high priests and he was executed.

Certain rituals are significant in the life of a Parsi like the rite of initiation into the Zoroastrianism, the Parsi New Year and the funeral rites involving the tower of silence. Such rituals are glimpsed into, in the film, piquing the curiosity of the audience but are never fully explained, another trait of magic realist films. The death of the grandfather is shown but the rituals are not performed precisely as he believed in his faith and tradition but believed that it was not limited to orthodox rituals which the conservative priests believe to be the essence of their religion. Backing this implication Tom Alter and Oorvazi Irani say that these rituals are not original to Zoroastrian faith, rather any religion is not original, they develop at certain points of time based on certain interpretations of the faith by certain people and was carried on being performed throughout the generations. Scholar Rekha Nagwanshi states that old rituals and customs of a

religion changes as time goes by and some of may be discarded where required depending on the need of time. The discrepancy does not necessarily imply a change in the essence of the faith; seen in the scene where the intellectual proposes to the BPP, the radical idea of discarding the ritual of sky burial and allowing children of Parsi women who married outside the community to admitted into Zoroastrianism. Even though the character Oorvazi is a true believer of Zarathustra she discards the rituals related to the funeral which takes four days, according to her grandfather's wishes.

The long contact with the Hindus in India led the Parsi Zoroastrians have adopted several Hindu customs and ceremonies like mehndi which is traditionally not part of their marriage ceremonies. But the marriage ceremony is strictly traditionally officiated by Parsi priests in the orthodox Iranian style. The funeral ceremonies are still a mystery to the non Parsees. The body of the deceased is treated with respect and is to be disposed in a way that it does not defile the elements of earth, water and air and does not cause any harm to the living. Hence in Zoroastrianism the dead is not burned, not buried and not disposed off in the water, its left exposed on a high hill, to the heat and the vultures in order to dispose it naturally. Though it is not mentioned in the scriptures and the film mentions that archaeological studies found evidence of burials in the Zoroastrian culture in Iran. The Zoroastrians abroad are unable to perform their funeral ceremonies using (Dakmas) Towers of silence, so they perform coffin burials although problems still arise in cities like Mumbai where the vulture population has drastically decreased over the years. Magic realism is intrinsically connected to cultural beliefs, tradition, folklores, reflecting a distinct cultural worldviews and capturing emotional states and the collective consciousness of the community. Hence magic realism in movies is explores issues of national and personal identity.

The film is clearly based on the Parsi Zoroastrians but what makes it magic realist that it explores the issue of identity through a fictional yet real, personal quest via the prism of the philosophy and heritage of Zarathustra. Thereby making the film personal, specific to the Zoroastrians, to India as well as universal, addressing questions related to God, Religion and even the meaning of life. Oorvazi Irani emphasizes that this is not a documentary film, not a historical film and not a religious one either. It is not preaching the Zoroastrian faith but like the country India, it's a spiritual film which makes it attractive and appealing to all humanity regardless of their religion. Even the film's screenplay writer Farukh Dhondy, a Parsi Zoroastrian comments that he is an atheist rather than a religious Parsi but he does believe in spirituality and that is what the film tries to spread.

The Bombay Parsi Panchayat [BPP] is considered the highest cultural governing body or authority for the Zoroastrian population in India. "The BPP has become corrupt, greedy and its core values have eroded." (Jehangir Mehta n.p). Jehangir Mehta observes that the beliefs of the trustees of such religious governing bodies have turned dogmatic. They are "wasting their time and effort on banning priests who are actually doing welfare of the community" (Jehangir Mehta n.p) by offering prayers for the Zoroastrians who have been cremated or buried or those who have performed the *Navjote* ceremonies of the children of Parsees who married outside the community. Liberal priests like Ervad K. Mandon and Ervad Framroze who performed the *Navjote* ceremonies of mixed children like Perseus and funeral prayers of those who did not perform the traditional funeral, are banned the fire temple by BPP. Such instances have been alluded to in the film like the scene of the violent treats and ruckus made on the occasion of Perseus's *Navjote* ceremony. A true priest feels Jehangir Mehta loves all mankind as that's what god has instructed and that each human must find their own way to be in harmony with god. The behaviour of BPP trustees show

their own self-interest and greed for power while falsely trying to establish themselves as the preservers of the Zoroastrian faith. The behaviour of the trustees in the community council scene in the film makes this evident, when the intellectual was rejected and branded as a heretic even before completing his explanation of a solution for the decreasing Zoroastrian population in India. The gullible and priest fearing Parsi population of Mumbai are easily swayed by BPP's threat of fatwas and religious excommunication. The film tries to make its audience realise that what matters most is not the light of the *Agairies* but the light of truth and faith in one's heart and this applies to all religions across the world. Blind obedience and unquestioned faith in one's religion is not enough for the survival of one's community, reason based changes are necessary in order to make one's faith function efficiently in the modern era; this does not change the essence of that faith.

Such a dogmatic religion is nothing new to the contemporary world; the high priests of Zarathrust can be equated to the Catholic Pope. The film and its magic realist narrative portrays the unique aspects of the religion of Parsees, Zoroastrianism simultaneously drawing attention to the fact that how similar its beliefs, cultures and customs are to the other religions existing in India and the world. For example, the *Navjote* ceremony is rite of initiation into the faith which is similar to *Baptism* in Christianity. The film also shows how Zoroastrianism being an ancient faith has influenced many other religions like Buddhism, Christianity and Islam. In one of the ending scenes it is mentioned that Zoroastrians were the ones who influence the Greeks in astronomy, alchemy and philosophy. Therefore, the orthodox Parsees of Mumbai must move beyond their religious borders towards a social harmony which is there in Kolkata, Indore and Delhi. "The trustees of the fire temples in Delhi are much more liberal, the priests there welcome the non -Parsi spouses, children and relatives of those who married outside the community" (Mayank Austen Soofi n.p), coexisting happily and peacefully. The "Parsi dharmshala in Indore conducts a special condolence

meeting ceremony in the hall outside the *Agiyari* after the traditional prayers are over, so their non-parsi friends and relatives can pay their respects” (Mayank Austen Soofi n.p). Delhi Anjuman’s chairperson, Mrs. Ava Khullar is married to a Hindu but has performed her religious duties and takes manages the organisation faithfully.

Ervad Jehan Bagli states that the collapse of the priestly hegemony left behind a class of ritual performing priesthood which was then depended on the grassroot community, for their livelihood. The priests today have become service workers who only mumble prayers rather than conducting welfare of the community. The beggar in the film comments that they are not feeding the fire of the faith rather, “feeding the fire in their bellies” (*The Path of Zarathustra* n.p). Ervad Jehan Bagli proposes that the need of the hour is of a priest who can cultivate religious tolerance and harmony. As Ervad Jehan Bagli and the intellectual in the film claim that the solution lies in openness, tolerance and accumulation of funds which back such true priest which will free them from the worries of making ends meet. The Mumbai priest must become more inclusive in their mind-sets, allow conversions and the children of inter religious marriages into the Zoroastrian faith. Such institutionalised religion will lose contemporary followers who believe in the ideals of liberty, fraternity and inclusiveness. This fact is emphasized throughout the film in a unique way, “there is no belief without the believers” (*The Path of Zarathustra* n.p). In the free country of India, the Parsees are free people, free to practice their own religion, thereby respecting and being tolerant to all other religions as well.

In the *Vendidad*, one of the religious scriptures of Zoroastrians, *Ahura Mazda* says that he prefers a person with children to one without children, this makes apparent that Zoroastrianism is a religion that welcomes children. Out of the 69, 000 Parsees of India half of them are female and one third of that half is in the reproductive age. It is apparent from the census studies that the

Parsees of India is an aged and dying race. In such a scenario female children are most desired unlike other religions of India, since on their shoulders lies the future of the ethnic race. Marriages within the Parsi community are encouraged and have its own advantages since the couple's environment, traditions and way of life is similar. Inter religious marriages is frowned upon in the Parsi community especially Parsi women marrying outside the community, who are there by excommunicated and their children not allowed to take up the Zoroastrian faith. This is one of the major reasons for the drastic reduction in the Parsi population.

In face of the crisis of the Parsees of India facing extinction, the film is one of the ways in which the Parsees are trying to assert their identity in a diverse way. They are constantly struggling to create their own space in the diverse country of India and asserting their difference from being termed merely Asians. The film while addressing the diminishing population, points to the internal debate raging within the community itself. This tiny community which according to a NDTV report is decreasing by 12% per decade is internally divided on the lines of conservatives who believe in preserving the purity of the race's bloodline rather than preserving its existence and the liberals who believe in accepting new blood within the community to keep their race, their faith alive. This debate is alluded to in the film via real and seemingly fantastical scenes. There is a real debate between the conservatives and the liberal, intellectual and an imaginary conversation between the historical prophets and the protagonist trying to find a solution to the present issues of the community. The scene's setting, the three- way conversation between them, the background sounds of the clashing waves and a smooth transition from the imaginary to the reality makes the film magic realist. It is almost impossible to figure out if the character Oorvazi was having a vision, was imagining these figures of the past or if she had really conversed with them; since Perseus, her cousin who was never taught to "dream with his eyes open" could also see and hear them.

Theorist claims the extinction of this community in a period of a little more than a century. In the face of such a crisis the conservatives of the community excommunicating daughters who marry a non Parsi and their children is not helping the cause. This in turn makes one question the ambivalent behaviour of the Parsi men who marry outside the community and whose children are allowed in the Zoroastrian faith, even though they do not wear the *Sudreh- Kusti*. “The success of Parsees is hindering their survival, the Parsi youth wants to gain higher education, be professionally established and own a house and car before marriage which means late marriages or no marriage. Out of the total only 30% Parsees marry and the rest remain single...this implies a correlation between the prosperity, literacy and the family size...having fewer children if the prosperity of a family is higher...Parsees being one of the most literate and prosperous communities of India seems to have fewer children every year.” (Sudha Ramachandran n.p.)

The 2001 Indian census report states that there are only 69,000 Parsees in India and that's a 40% decrease in the population from the year 1941. The theory established by Harvard university Ph. D candidate Dinyar Patel states the cause of the decline being their late marriages which lead to lower fertility rates, leading to lesser births in the community. According to a demographic survey the median age of marriage of Parsees in 1991 was 24 years and in 1999 is 48 years. It's apparent that the Parsees are an aged group and supposedly the highest number of single women belongs to this community. Dinyar Patel conducted a study across 600 Parsi families, 81% felt that the decline in their numbers is due to intermarriages and the second cause is emigration. Yet the Parsi trustees are optimistic and hopeful, conducting their weekly religious classes at the Fire Temple with their young pupils and performing *Navjote* ceremonies. Mr. Mehernosh Shapoojee, a trustee, believes that their faith has survived persecution many centuries ago and has survived in India and it will keep on surviving. “The BPP proposed the opening fertility clinics, sponsoring

fertility treatments, financially supporting the third child of a Parsi couple and even suggesting giving larger area for accommodation to Parsees to encourage them to have bigger families” (Sudha Ramachandran n.p.). Sudha Ramachandran observes that these solutions are weak and the best solution is to redefine the identity of being a Parsi in the modern era, liberally allowing the intermarrying Parsees children and spouses to enter the Zoroastrian faith if they wish to convert. The need of the hour is to continue the Parsi community rather than to continue the purity of the community. Along with this Dinyar Patel proposes doubling the efforts of convincing Parsees to marry and conceive. Even the Indian government have woken up to this crisis and launched the campaign titled “Jiyo Parsee” to support the dwindling population of Parsees in India.

The 2001 Indian census report which the director Oorvazi Irani got acquainted with in 2006 community commission meeting had woken her up to the extinction of the Zoroastrians and was inspired to make this film. She admits that she is not a religious person but believes that she and all human beings are spiritual and their religion forms an integral part of their lives and identity. Hence she chose to produce a magic realist film which is able to depict her communities concerns while linking to the concerns of the greater humanity. The Mumbai High Court allowed children of mixed marriages, having a Parsi father being considered a Parsi, not the BPP. In 2003 some conservative priests passed a resolution invalidating the marriages between a Parsi and non Parsi and children of such marriages will not be allowed into the faith, earlier it was allowed under the Special Marriages Act. Since 35% of the Parsi population opt to marry outside the community, such a resolution of throwing members of the community does not help the threat of the community’s extinction.

The principle tenets of Zoroastrianism are as mentioned before is to have *Good Thoughts, Good Words and Good Deeds* and follow the path of Truth. The *Avesta*, their religious text says

that human beings have the free will to choose between the path of good and evil and according to their choices they will reap its effect. Such teachings are universal and are common to all faiths; the film tries to give out this message as well. Such a universal strain is a feature of magic realist films. India has rich mythological, cultural and spiritual bases serves as an ideal foundation and raw material for a magic realist narrative, to which people of diverse cultures may be attracted to. Those who do not know about this will be interested and curious about this mysterious faith. Writer Yezad Kapadia writes in his article, that in Norway he met a Kurd cab driver and his friend, who had converted to Zoroastrianism with which the Kurdish faith shares many traits. Wikipedia reports that in 2015 around 10,000 Kurds converted to Zoroastrianism, in Afghanistan. They say that though their wives are not Zoroastrians but they are keenly interested in it.

Kojeste Mistree Parsi religious scholar states that the Zoroastrian belief is to spread *Good Thoughts, Good Deeds and Good Words*, to spread an ethical awareness in the world and these are the need of the hour. The film tries to bring out this essential message subtly through the message of the mysterious book. The book has been called the book of life, the book of faith and the book of religion but perhaps it's the book of one's mind. It's the essence of all religions. It's not complex, it's the basis of all religion, and it's what one understands of one's faith which is love and understanding for each other, for humanity. One does not require written books for that; hence the book is shown to be gradually swept away with the waves. In a scene the character Oorvazi answers Perseus confusion of not understanding religion from the books he was reading in to understand it, that maybe religion is not something to be understood through books rather its understanding comes from within oneself. The unique and subtle treatment of history, culture and religion within the cotemporary world without the losing focus of its specific issue makes the film magic realist.

The film is not a conventional plot driven film, it carries two layers of meaning which are carried together, simultaneously throughout the film. The whole narrative is shown through the eyes of the protagonist Oorvazi with occasional voice overs, which were perhaps necessary to explain the premise of the narrative since the audience is relatively ignorant about the Zoroastrian faith. Shishir Kumar, the actor who plays the character of Zurvan in the film observes that the film demands complete, serious attention from its viewers, to be able to understand in the first place. Yet it is not the type of film which could be understood, it is confusing to distinguish between the protagonists' visions and what's really happening with her, the dual identities of the characters of Zurvan/the clockmaker, Mazdak/the intellectual and Mani/the beggar does not help the understanding as well. Each viewing of the film reveals a new dimension of it, which is another trait of being a magic realist film. The film has a calm and composed demeanour even in the scenes of serious misery, Oorvazi Irani points out that the protagonist has a dual presence at the one at the level of the common human being and the other at the spiritually higher level, which she may have achieved by her down to earth and solitary life in the hermitage like cottage, in the village, while learning the teaching of her meditative grandfather. The film begins with daybreak, showing images of the rising and setting sun. The sun is shown not in its raging heat but as a superior, kind, universal, life giving force which many religions including the Zoroastrians worship. Zoroastrians view the sun as a symbol of the deity *Ahura Mazda* and as a manifestation of the elements of fire and light, which form the universe and everything in it.

The film is deeply entrenched in the cultural myths, legends and symbols of the Zoroastrian culture as well as the Indian culture, showing how these cultures have the same roots and influence each other throughout history. The scenes of the protagonist lighting the fire allude to their Iranian heritage, to the holy fire from Iran when they escaped. The fire represents the present, past and

future of their faith. It represents the faith one has in one's religion, one's god and most importantly one's own spirit. Fire is sacred in Hindu tradition, though it is seen as a medium of linking or transporting one's thoughts to the deity while murmuring it in front of the fire, whereas in Zoroastrianism the fire is one of the manifestations of their deity itself. Zoroastrians are called *Fire Worshipers* and their place of worship is called the *Fire Temple*. In the film the grandfather keeps saying "keep the fire burning", though at first the audience may think he means the fire in the house which all Zoroastrians keep burning in their houses, a manifestation of their god. But as the film progresses one starts to understand that what he meant was the keep the fire of faith alive in their hearts and continue doing the task Zarathustra had begun, defeating evil by following the path of Truth and honesty.

The film shows the external and internal journey of the protagonist simultaneously. It shows the past, present and future of the community at the same time. All these events are happening in the real world and not in the protagonist's dream or her surreal consciousness; it is not shown through a flashback or a time travel technique as it is generally done in science fiction or fantasy movies. This can then only be achieved via magic realism. The film reminds us something that we already know but had forgotten in the chaos of the modern world. It reminds us that life is a journey, a linear movement towards a destination but its path originates from the past and its foundations for the future must be laid in the present. The film traces the external journey of the protagonist from the village to the city of Mumbai, from the solitude to the civilization where her people, the Parsees, reside. Her journey may be equated to the journey the first prophet of Zoroastrianism, Zarathustra, undertook a journey to find this true faith when he was 20 years old, and he meditated in solitude, away from civilisation and returned to preach the wisdom he gained when he was thirty. Similarly, Oorvazi, the protagonist, had left the city and lived and meditated

with her grandfather in the secluded village and returned many years later as a grown woman. The protagonist may not be the manifestation of the prophet himself but her character is a metaphor of every person who is in search of their faith. She becomes a representation of all Parsees who are confused about their faith and are living in ambivalence. It's not a physical journey rather it's the spiritual quest to one's spirituality, in which one can reach one's destination by searching, questioning and doing rather than by finding answers. The journey is important not the destination, since the process itself will ennoble the traveller.

It is interesting that the protagonist played by the director herself is named Oorvazi which is the name of the director in reality. This may imply that the director is not merely playing a fictional character in the film rather it is an aspect of her real personality which like all contemporary Parsees is confused about their faith and want some practical answers. The quest she undertakes is to find her roots, her true identity and find answers to the questions she has regarding her faith while her community faces the threat of extinction. The motif of the journey used by the film as a process and as a change serves the purpose of magic realism by redefining the meaning of one's surrounding environment and one's cultural identity. The film like any magic realist film re-orientates one's perception of the world and its matters. In her quest she is guided by real yet imaginary characters from the past, who may still be present in the present. The recognition comes to her not merely from the grandfather's teachings or from reading the book but from the amalgamation of both of these and examining them herself in the light of her recent experiences with the beggar, the intellectual and the clockmaker. The mysterious book only gives her the moral ethic of *Good Thoughts, Good Words and Good Deeds*, but she herself links it to the basis of one's faith, to follow those ethics while loving others and walking together on the path of truth. Her experiences amongst her people in the contemporary reality, makes her realise that practicality and

liberal acceptance is the way to exist and live in this modern world. Negotiations and tolerance with other cultures is necessary for existence, after all *God*, be it *Ahura Mazda*, *Christ* or *Deva* all teach love for all humanity.

While making a magic realist film the director must have a solid understanding of the country its basing its plot on, of its cultures, customs, myths, legends and traditions as these in turn will weave the magic realist narrative which will thereby enrich the understanding of its viewers. She being a Parsee presents the personal aspect of the issue, though it is not to propagate the Zoroastrian faith but merely to record its unique identity and existence. Under the threat of the community's disappearance her concern is to preserve a record of its existence, its heritage and its influence on many other major religions like Christianity and Islam. The way the film approaches its climax is not through actions or responses of the characters like an ordinary Bollywood film rather affect is brought about through the combination of the conversations of the characters, the setting frame and background sounds.

The film has many silent scenes and pauses in between of sentences; the magic realist form fills these silences and gaps with mystery and meanings. It's left to the audience to solve these mysteries and meanings which ambiguously unravel themselves as the movie progresses though not through actions but through gestures, settings, tones and sounds. For instance, the scene where Oorvazi carts her grandfather's dead body to the hill for sky burial, there is no conversation, no voiceover rather a solemn yet calming music plays in the background while she settles his body on the ground, tears off his clothes and takes off his watch which has stopped running like his breath. It is later that the viewer understands the significance of the watch or rather the significance of time, when the character of Zurvan, the manifestation of Time itself appears. The watch which had stopped signifies the community and the faith that is dying, stagnant and needs revival

desperately. Zurvan, the manifestation of eternal time which sees all shows Oorvazi the past and present of their faith and implies its eminent end. True faith is not afraid of rational questioning and when she questions if time is relative, if Zurvan only exists in her consciousness. She discovers that faith itself lies in one's consciousness, in one's heart; it's abstract and can only be continued by practice of its ethics which is to follow the path of Good Words Good Thoughts and Good Deeds. It does not require these staunch orthodox rituals or blind obedience.

The film is not a historical film, not a religious film and not completely a philosophical film. The film enquires into the Iranian heritage of the Parsees and shows the how they are learning to cope with their diasporic and postcolonial identity in India as well as a philosophical enquiry into the human existence. The film's magic realist narrative reworks the community's history and represents it in an unconventional way with real places, real events and real people. Religion is an issue the modern people view very superficially but it still is a fundamental part of one's life and identity. This film by using magic realism deals with the concerns of one specific faith while addressing the universal issue of people forgetting the main purpose and essence of faith itself. The film's issue is applicable to any faith and the use of magic realism makes it universal. It is not religious in the sense to propagate one particular religion rather presents the individuals relationship with one's religion and community. It is a slow paced film matching the seriousness, depth and fragility of the issue, unlike the fast paced Bollywood films. It is apparent that this film is not for those who come to a theatre for entertainment and to escape the troubles of the real world. It targets an intellectual, sophisticated audience who is able to evaluate the issue rationally. It is the directors desire to present the audience with something which is appealing as well as contemplating, which stays with them even after they leave the theatre. Magical realist narratives target a sophisticated group of the population across the globe. The title of the film is symbolically

significant; it may appear deceptive making the movie seem religious but it merely serves as a guide to the spiritual quest on which every human being goes at some point of their lives. Oorvazi Irani claims, “I don’t claim to give you answers ...the film is trying to question certain facts, rituals, practices interpretations because any religion is about what it was and what it has become.it evolves over centuries of time...every generation is born with a certain interpretation and everyone has moulded it in a different way.” (Oorvazi Irani interviewed by Shweta Kulkarni n.p.). “Going back to one’s roots is a meaningful experience for any individual” (Shweta Kulkarni n.p). The film is about the universal question of existence and the direct involvement of the director in the film, putting a part of her identity in a fictional character makes this film quite postmodern making it even more magic realist.

It is an ongoing debate about cinema’s transformative powers. If it is able to change people’s lives and to what extend? The answers to such questions tilt in the favour of cinema, acknowledging cinema being an agent of change. The film looks at the internal debate of the Parsi community from the personal perspective of a confused but faithful Parsi woman. The perspective presented to the audience may not be a completely objective but its neutral in the sense of an ambivalent individual trying to understand one’s faith. Regardless of the faith one is born into one must rationalise and question it and then chose to follow it or not. The film stresses on free will of an individual, one is free to choose what path to follow. Such an external yet internal perspective is portrayed by magic realist films. Oorvazi says in the film, “our choices are our final prophecy” (*The Path of Zarathustra* n.p). The director in an interview with Shoma Chatterji states that her aim was to dispel the myths around the faith and educate Parsees and non Parsees about it. The storyline of the film may seem very abstract and spiritual but its portrayal is very realistic and

visual, richly layering the reality with inner, poetic, spiritual realisation. It shows nothing which is practically impossible.

The main characters including Oorvazi have a double presence; she is an ordinary Parsi woman as well as an individual in search of her identity and her faith. Other characters like the intellectual also represent Mazdak, a religious reformer. The radical prophet of the Sasanian times who challenge the orthodox myth of Zurvan (Time), which was dominant then. This myth denies the existence of *Ahura Mazda* as the supreme creator. His teachings were regarded as heresy as the BPP regards the intellectual's solutions. On Mazdak's beliefs Mazdaism is established, which is the current form of Zoroastrianism, followed in India. Oorvazi Irani claims that her scriptwriter Farrukh Dhondy was able to "bridge that gap between the past and the present beautifully, with artistic devices to bring out little known historical and heretic characters, from ancient Zoroastrian past." She adds that the character of Mazdak "appears in the modern times symbolising magic realism that the medium of cinema offers" (Shweta Kulkarni. n.p.). Characters like Zurvan, Mazdak, Mani and Kardir symbolise the past and the present, the director feels that was the only way the protagonist could converse with them without being pulled into a fantasy world. Although Kardir does not have a precise dual identity in the present but the BPP represents the orthodox ideas which Kardir had in the past. The BPP like Kardir took upon the title of the defender of faith without actually evaluating if that will truly be benefitting the community. The film overall is a learning experience for all its viewers.

The mystery of the book is revealed in intriguing layers but never revealed completely. The book represents the unravelling of the meaning religion holds to each individual, a personal interpretation. This is apparent from the scene when Perseus tries to read the book and it seems to him that it's written in different languages and the writing on the page disappears and changes into

another page by itself, that's because Perseus is still confused about his faith. In the end the book is washed away as Oorvazi no longer requires a book to understand her faith. The film begins with the ripples in the well water and ends with the waves of the sea, implying that the beginning and the end are connected like humanity is connected with each other through love and understanding. Magic realist films render such ordinary things significant in the larger universe. Unlike surrealist films, these are real things which are not distorted by one's psyche yet hold meaning for them.

The viewers at the end of the film may realise that the film was about love, religion ultimately teaches love. The crisis Parsees are facing may ultimately find its solution through love and acceptance. Shoma Chatterji implies that the relationship between Oorvazi and Perseus which had not formed due to issues of their youth and because he is not a pure blooded Parsi, may be revived now and the change coming from such a marriage between a pure blooded Parsi woman and a child of a Parsi and a non Parsi couple. The director supports such a union and explains that her own sister is also married to a non Parsi. She asserts

. . . faith should not be shot sighted and cling to its superiority complexes...one needs to question the foundations of beliefs and practices that might have outlines their time in today's world...discuss and decide which practices to improve upon...to reinvent and which to let go. To remain true to one's faith is not to follow and practice rituals that have outlived their meanings and significance ...follow what one's heart holds to be true, without paying...importance to what's written in some book. (Oorvazi Irani interview with Shoma A. Chatterji n.p.)

The film like most magic realist films has an open ending, leaving it to the viewers to decide its end. Magic realist films present its audience with multiple possibilities and viewpoints of the reality. The film presents an open conclusion regarding myths, legends and traditions of the

faith. The audience and the protagonist do not find out what's actually written in the mysterious book, which is implied of being an amalgamation of all the religious texts regarding the Zoroastrian faith. But the essence of it is understood; the message we get at the end is what the protagonist understood of her faith and implies that one must self-interpret one's faith with rationality. The film has a gentle, calming, slow paced yet understanding mood and outlook, implying that religion is not something to be understood vigorously and hastily. It requires patience, openness and understanding.

The director made special efforts to film at real, local places which match the philosophical and mystical mood of the film visually and carries on the soft, peaceful content smoothly. It's not a typical in-studio produced film for instance the cottage where the grandfather dies are a real cottage in the peaceful, solitary village of Vasai. It is actually an ashram used for meditation and study of religious texts by a Parsi gentleman. Tom Alter claims that the spiritual aura and peaceful surroundings of the place inspired in him spiritual feelings which helped him in acting out this role. The shots at the sea which capture the rise and fall of the waves point to the turbulence that is happening in their minds and faith. The actors were chosen from Parsi and non Parsi backgrounds in order to disperse the message in an even way without making the film over exaggerated and melodramatic, the form of magic realism helped a great deal in achieving this. Being a magic realist film a great deal of attention is given to the scene frames, the background score of the scenes and the lighting which implied the mood and direction of the scene itself. The scenes do not transport its viewers to another world rather it shows them what's happening in the real from a different angle. The mystical world blends into the real one, giving common, everyday scenes a mystical aura. For instance, the scene where Oorvazi is reading a book on the Zoroastrian religion to look for answers of the questions she has regarding her faith and Perseus asks if it was

helpful as the book has not helped his understanding of the faith he has chosen to follow. The scene of early morning, a new day, new light, and the bright sunlight pierces through the coverings of the window, from Oorvazi's direction towards Perseus in slating beams. Illuminated by this light Oorvazi states that maybe religion is not something to be understood from the books, rather one has to self-interpret it under the light of one's experiences and observations. It's as if the God's light illuminates Oorvazi, who imparts it to Perseus.

Shoma Chatterji asserts that even the indoor locations are chosen with care, giving insight into the personal and cultural lives of Parsees. The aunt's house, has markers of Parsi culture, Oorvazi is served dal ni poori, a traditional Parsi dish. The scenes shot in the fire temple, focusing on the fire burning, are carefully chosen to leave a deep impression on the audience. It is apparent the film is not plot driven, there is actually no concrete story rather it's filled with scenes which are in them complete and impactful. Nevertheless, the base message of the film ties these scenes together in stream of consciousness form and presenting a continuous story, this is possible due to magic realism. The film is not limited to the Parsees and can be appreciated by all. It portrays a responsible and progressive outlook to life.

The popular movie site IMDB categorises this film as a mystery, drama and many blogs categorise it as a philosophical drama, others call it a Docu-drama. But the director and those who interviewed her categorise it as magic realist. It is not an Art film, at first glance it may seem as a documentary type of dramatic film but it's not that completely and it's certainly not a fantasy film. It is a film which touches upon all these genres but does not fit perfectly in any. She believes that cinema is a medium through which the artist can express their thoughts and share it with its audience. The form of magic realism enables her to connect with her audience through her personal, honest expression while exploring the humanistic aspect of one's faith. Keyur Seta views

it as a contemporary, new age film which is at the level of international cinema. The bold intensions of the film are handled well with magic realism, producing an enlightening end product. Oorvazi Irani asserts that magical realism is not considered a film genre but it helped her define the film most appropriately as magic realism at one level is very real, it has real locations, real characters and real situations. It does not require making a set and being transported to a fantastical world which happens in case of fantasy movies. The story takes place in the real world yet it's not the conventional, everyday world we live in. She claims that the locations chosen have a surrealist quality which makes the film seem as if taking place somewhere between the real and the imaginary world. Through the medium of cinema one can take the audience into such a world while staying rooted in reality. Oorvazi Irani asserts that the definition of magic in magic realism is relative. It is not the magic which makes things appear and disappear or portrayal of special effects like it is in science fiction films rather magic is created within the real dimension through dynamic characters who personify larger than life, abstract characters like Zurvan. Opening of such dimensions in the reality we live in, is magical. Magic realism is an historic mode which has its own legitimacy and validation as opposed to the pre-established realist and documentary methods.

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