Voices of Ethnicity in Selected Parsi Indian English Novels

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With over 1.21 billion people India is a country of huge genetic, linguistic, social and cultural diversity. Among two thousand ethnic groups, Parsi ethnicity has a prominent place. Members of the Zoroastrian community are referred as Parsi. The Zoroastrian religion claims to have been revealed by the God, Zarathustra.

Good Thoughts
Good Words
Good Deeds

These are the images of Prophet Zarathustra. Zoroastrianism stresses truth more than anything else.

“Truth is the greatest virtue. It is happiness. Happy is he who is truthful for the sake of truth.” (Ashem Vohu).

Parsi People of India immigrated first time in between 8th to 10th century from Khorasan Province of Iran to Sanjan area of Gujarat. This migration is thought to escape the harsh rule of fanatic Arab Muslim invaders. Then the Parsis shifted to Bombay from rural Gujarat during the British rule in India. After entering Bombay at the most opportune time in urbanization of India, the Parsis became the most urbanized community.

The role of the Parsis in India may be considered fewer than five headings- politics, commerce & industry, the professions, science and medicine, arts and literature. In politics Parsis have made a significant contribution in Indian freedom movement. Dadabhai Naoroji, Pheroze Shah Mehta and Dinshaw Wacha actively participated in Indian freedom movement. Like politics, Parsis have played a significant role in the upliftment of the Nation’s economy. Jamshedji Tata, Godrej are the notable Parsi businessman in India.

“Parsis are said most westernized of the communities in India”

Homijehangir Bhaba (eminent scientist), Sohrabmodi (famous actor-producer), Khurshid Minocher (first Indian women music director) are all the fruits of Parsi ethnicity.

Despite their long residence in India, they did never dilute their intrinsic Zoroastrianess and maintained their distinctiveness compared to other community. The community is self consciously still trying to preserve their ethno-religious parsi-iran Identity. Though their nationality is Indian they are psychologically diaspora. Mahatma Gandhi once said-

“In numbers Parsis are beneath contempt, but in contribution beyond compare”.

Numerically the community is insignificant. Their total number is 69601 i.e. 0.006% of total population. Their numbers are steadily declining probably because of their intercommunity
marriages, slower birth rate, and migration to other countries and gradually the community may be termed as tribe. All minority groups tend to experience anxiety when they live in dominant situation. Ethno-centric discourse is produced because of a lot of anxiety about their community. This is the reason why most of Parsi writers assert their ethnic identity in their creative writings. There are so many Parsi writers like Rohinton Mistry, Firdaus Kanga, Farrukh Dhondy, Boman Desai, Perin Bharucha, Dina Mehta, Meher Pesterjee, Nargis Dalal, Gieve Patel, K.N. Daruwalla and many others.

Among these writers Rohinton Mistry, Bapsi Sidhwa, Farrukh Dhondy and Dina Mehta are the authentic voices of the Parsi community. They are fully aware of the fact that Parsi community is fast disappearing. So, they through their works intend to preserve their ethnicity for future.

**Bapsi Sidhwa**

Bapsi Sidhwa was born in 1938 in a Lahore based Parsi family which like many others Parsi family, after the partitioning of India, chose to stay on in the newly created state of Pakistan. Sidhwa’s two novels, ‘The Crow Eaters’ and ‘Ice Candy Man’ reflect the Parsi ethos.

Sidhwa’s first novel ‘The Crow Eaters’ (1978) belongs to comic mode. It deals with the lives and fortunes of the Junglewalls, a Parsi family in British India. She establishes her Parsi identity in the very opening pages of the novel. The novel which describes itself as “the hilarious saga of Parsi family”. It begins with Faredoon Junglewalla, the Patriarch of the Parsi community at Lahore, explaining the secret of his success by parallel with the history of his people.

“There are hardly a hundred and 20 thousand Parsis in the world --------- and still we maintain our identity--- why?”

Sidhwa portrayed the dying businessman Faredoon Junglewalla’s offspring to remain loyal to the British Empire. All the Parsis wanted from the ruling British authorities were religious autonomy and protection. They got both. Such feelings were prevalent in the Parsi milieu and Sidhwa aptly conveys it in “the Crow Eaters”. Though the protagonist Faredoon and all the major characters of the book are Parsis and that Parsi life and rituals (Novjote Ceremony, marriage, death rituals) are minutely described in this novel but the novel is an attack on the Parsi community. According to Makar and R. Paranjape-

“The Crow Eaters’ is not a novel particularly about Parsis instead it is a novel where characters happen to be Parsis”. The characters could well have been Hindu or Muslim and a good deal of satire would still have carried; each ethnic group, after all has its peculiarities and absurdities”.

Sidhwa’s ‘Ice Candy Man’ (1990) reverts to Parsi characters but they are in varying degrees integrated into the pre-partition Indian context. The action is seen through a polio affected little Parsi girl Lenny’s eyes, the events are of broader significance. The novel opens with Lenny’s ayah, the chocolate brown, desirable round cheeked full breasted woman who is surrounded by thirteen admirers from different religions. On these admirers, the Ice Candy Man is central to all the events in the novel. He praised her feminity and fecundity. Ayah’s charming personality and beauty exercises a hypnotic influence on the Ice Candy man. When the partition riots erupt, ice candy man seizes his chance to debase the Ayah and leads a Muslim mob to Lenny’s house. Ayah is dragged away by the mob and raped. It is her personal misfortune that she is betrayed by
the people who love her most. Lenny’s God mother Rodhabai with the help of the recovered women Camp liberates Ayah. Ultimately she is able to return to Amritsar where her family live.

The loss of communal harmony, which is at the centre of this story, is the worse consequences of partition. The Hindus, the Muslims and the Sikhs used to live in an atmosphere of communal harmony before the partition movement begins. This new demographic change in Lahore upsets Lenny and so remarks –

“Lahore is suddenly emptied of yet another hoary dimension; there is no Brahmin with Caste….. Hindus in dhotis.”

The novelist gives a true picture of the traumatic event of the partition. In this novel Sidhwa confronts the issue of how the Parsi identity was going to cope with the changes in the political front. Lenny is a witness to the varied adult worlds which are in the process of partition. With the creation of the new Muslim State, Lenny’s world shrinks; it loses its Hindu and Sikhs. Lenny narrates “My world is compressed”. Thus the Parsi ethnicity in newly created Pakistan is also a loser and becomes a reductive entity.

**Farrukh Dhondy**

Farrukh Dhondy was born and brought up in Poona. His first novel ‘Bombay Duck’(1990) is a diasporic novel with several cross cultural identity. The novel is divided in two parts. The two principal narrators of ‘Bombay Duck’ are a black English man, Ali Abdul Rahaman and the Parsi Xavasxa. In the first part the novel gives us the story of strange family, life of Rahaman whose wife is in love with a Pak weapon supplier. The greatest moment comes when David Steam choose him to play the role of Lord Rama in his dream project, a stage adaptation of the epic “the Ramayana”. In the first part of the novel, the focus is on India’s rich cultural heritage and a messy present of communal tension and riots. Dhondy criticizes Rahaman for treating Indian culture as a commodity for commercial purpose.

In the second part, the Parsi protagonist Mr. Xavasxa’s involvement in the international traffic in babies is a serious offence from criminal point of view. The novel ends with Mr. Xavasxa’s retrospect as he counts his days for deportation to India. In this part Dhondy explains the rituals, customs, and various ceremonies of the Zoroastrian religion. From thematic point of view the novel presents a harmonious blending of country with Parsi community. His focus does not remain on one particular point of the novel but he deals with culture, religion, communal disharmony, politics, Child smuggling, Parsi theatre, sex, religious fundamentalism and overall Parsi ethnicity. In this way Dhondy highlights the voices of the Parsi ethnicity by mingling the East and the West.

**Rohinton Mistry**

Rohinton Mistry, born in Bombay in 1952 migrated to Canada in 1975. He is keenly aware of his community’s predicament. His fiction, therefore, may be said to depict ethnic atrophy syndrome. He captures in his writings the life and struggle for survival of Parsi community.

His first novel ‘Such A Long Journey’(1991) was awarded Governor General’s Award in Canada and the Commonwealth Prize in 1992. The novel not only problematises the Parsi Diaspora in Indian context but also projects his anti-colonial resistance. As Michel Foucaunt writes “where there is power, there is resistance”. In ‘Such A Long Journey’, a large rhythm of patterns of empowerment and modes of resistance has been carved out through the lives of the central character Gustad Noble and his family.
The writer narrates a pathetic and rather gloomy story of the life of Gustad Noble, the Parsi protagonist of the novel who is a middle class man working in a bank. He has to face the hardships of life everyday but he dreams for the future prosperity of his family. Gustad is the father of three children, two sons- Shorab, Darius and Roshan, the daughter. He has two faithful and closest friends- Major Bilimoria and Dinshawji who also live in Khodadad buildings. First of all, the sudden disappearance of Bilimoria from Khodadad building shocks him considerably because he is his friend, philosopher and guide. Another tragic event that upsets Gustad is his son’s refusing of admission to the IIT. Gustad faces all the trifles and trials of life squarely, though not always heroically. His dear friend Dinshawji’s death and tragic death of Tehmul Lungraa disturbs him very much.

The theme of ‘Such A Long Journey’ revolves around histories, politics and the common anxiety of a middle classman Gustad Noble. Being a mouthpiece of Parsi community Gustad has deep hatred for Nehru. Gustad is ruthless in satirizing the Nehru family. According to M.Mani Meitei-

“Mistry is a stern political satirist and a devout critic of war. His attack on Nehru and Indira Gandhi is unprecedented. Mistry goes on describing Nehru’s frustration, ill-temper, political intrigues that surrounded him”.

The novel also deals with some Parsi rituals, viz. wearing of ‘Kusti’ and ‘Sudra’, the prayer from ‘Avesta’, the rituals at the tower of silence, the practicing of occult rites by Miss Kutpitia and Dilnavaz for recovery of Roshan. Mistry has his own concept of faith. Following the tenets of Zoroastrianism, Mistry respects that all the world religion and believes that they all lead to the same goal. Gustad says to the pavement artist –

“You see, I don’t like to weaken anyone’s faith. Miracle, magic, mechanical trick, coincidence does it matter what it is, as long as it helps.”

Though Gustad has to face many difficulties, he survives without succumbing to any prolonged despair or bitterness because of his Parsi ethical upbringing. At the end, Gustad becomes matured enough to accept the reality of life as he cannot resist the forces beyond his reach. Thus “Such A Long Journey” has besides “urgent political agenda’s made a vital contribution to the corpus of Parsi fiction. As a member of the marginalized community Mistry provides rich insights into the turbulent Parsi mind.

In ‘The Family Matters’(2002) Rohinton confines himself only to the Parsi community that he knows so well and therefore portrays authentically. Linda L. Richards, appreciating the novel, writes,

“His most recent novel, ‘Family Matters’ is brilliant. It manages to be warm and familiar, while for North American readers, at any rate fragrantly exotic.”

The main characters in ‘The Family Matters’ are Parsis. The story revolves around the life of seventy nine year old Nariman Vakeel, a widower who is suffering from Parkinson’s disease which is a common disease of Parsis because of their infertility and late marriages. His two adult step children, Jal and Coomy take care of him. Roxana is Nariman’s own daughter who lives at Pleasant Villa with her husband and two sons. After an accident, Nariman breaks his legs and he has to need a bed rest. Jal and Coomy refuse to take care of him and Nariman is pushed into Roxana’s small apartment. Nariman’s arrival thus adds to the financial difficulties of the poor Parsi couple.
Thus the novel thus becomes the story of everyday reality of family life and its politics and also the grim and grit of life in modern Bombay. Thus Mistry has once again shown the Parsi life with all its idiosyncrasies and peculiarities is full of stories with universal appeal. Two types of womanhood are presented here. It is also the story of the best and worst in human nature. Coomy is an inhuman woman. On the other hand, Roxana is full of kindness, moral values and responsibilities. Roxana is a typical Parsi woman with a typical Indian spirit. The novel really deserves the credit of winning the Kiriyama Pacific Rim Book Prize.

**Dina Mehta**

Dina Mehta is an Indian writer belonging to the Parsi community. All the works of Mehta reflects the ‘history of India’ and their community in different ways. ‘And Some Take a Lover’ (1992) reflects the conflicting loyalties of a middle class Parsi family in Bombay, enmeshed in the turmoil caused by the Quit India Movement and the Naval Ratings Mutiny of the 1946. On the wide canvas of the novel, the freedom struggle, Gandhian ideology, riots, suspicious British character and the British rule In India are effectively sketched. Ethnicity, chaos and the theme at alienation are mentioned explicitly in this novel.

The protagonist of the novel Roshni Wadia, a young Parsi girl, feels betrayed in her love affair with a college friend Sudhir, an austere Gandhian who puts the demands of public duty above personal desires. Influenced by Gandhi, Roshni had the Eastern inclination in her. She was a misfit in Parsi community. For Roshni, the dynamics of the Quit India Movement and Gandhiji’s call to the youth to eradicate untouchability in the village leads to the disintegration of her love affairs. When Sudhir married an untouchable girl Gouribai, Roshni thought that love can be sacrificed at the altar of political expediency.

Roshni is the most powerful and most victimized tragic character in the novel. Roshni represents different trends of emancipation of a Parsi woman. She is a true representative of a liberal education and upbringing, an individual with a mind of her own and with firm convictions. Her struggle is mere poignant in the larger social world outside the immediate surroundings of her Parsi community... she is an idealist of love and represents the nobility of Indian womanhood in the modern context. Her urge for love is natural and rightful but her failure to achieve this is not her failure; it is the failure of the society and the system.

The novel has the twin theme of love and politics represented by Roshni and Gandhiji respectively. With Sudhir’s death in malaria, a vacuum occurs in Roshni’s life but she resolves to follow Sudhir’s ideas which she had not been able to do when he was alive. Roshni also represents generation conflict, the voices of new generation of her community that viewed the process of social, economic and educational assimilation with the British critically. Mehta’s novel according to Paranjape marks “a significant departure from the typical Parsi novel. It is an Indian novel admirably realistic mode. Roshni becomes both an ‘arhat and a ‘jeevanmukta’.

The Parsi novels in English, the Zoroastrian worldview thus acts as a propelling force and provides an excellent medium for adaptability. Thus Zoroastrian world view plays a very positive and fruitful role in the all round welfare of the Parsees. It is the matter of shame that the adapted sons of soil (Parsis) have to face a fear of extinction. We have to realize the moral that the Parsi community is a very resourceful community for India and our motherland cannot afford to lose it.
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