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## THE ASSERTION OF PARSI ETHNIC IDENTITY IN THE INDIAN ENGLISH FICTION

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### **Abstract:**

*English Literature in Indian subcontinent, from the very early years, had prolific Parsi writers. The Parsi acceptance of English Language education and the intensive study of European Literature resulted in Parsis being in the vanguard of English creative writing in India. In these sketches, stories and novels, written during the early and middle years of Indian English Fiction, there is not much stress on the Parsi identity of the authors. The identity of the Parsi, as a distinct ethno-religious minority in India has not been highlighted. It is only in the recent novels written by the Parsis that one finds a definite assertion of ethnic identity. It is in the novels and short stories of Bapsi Sidhwa, Farrukh Dhondy, Rohinton Mistry, Firdaus Kanga and Boman Desai that the ethnic uniqueness of the Parsi community is focused upon. This raises several important questions: Why do Parsi novelists today feel the need to assert their Parsi identity? What is a Parsi identity? Is it different from an Indian identity? How is it different? The assertion of an ethnic Parsi identity also raises the related question of how a heightened awareness of ethnicity correlates to assimilation into the Indian context or in the case of Parsis who live in the West, in an expatriate milieu.*

**Keywords:** *English Literature, Parsi Literature, Ethnicity, Identity, etc.*

Novel has been a popular form of literature from time immemorial. In ancient time, fictional literature was expressed in the verse narrative form including poems and epics to which the Ramayana and the Mahabharata stand testimony till date, Novels, read either for information or entertainment, make an essential part of literacy education. Their exposition of the richness of culture, the triumphs and turbulences of an era, the achievements of an age, prove an exquisite legacy for the future generations. Novels cover a diverse range of genres, each of which exemplifies a particular subject matter; popular genres include romance, science fiction, fantasy, crime and horror. It is apparent that the partition and the decolonization of the sub continent in 1947 diverted the flow and post independent literature centered on the trauma and chaos prevalent in the society. The communal conflicts on both sides led to excruciating misery and immense loss of lives and property.

English Literature in Indian sub continent has from the very early years, had prolific Parsi writers. The Parsi acceptance of English Language education and the intensive study of European Literature resulted in Parsis being in the vanguard of English creative writing in India. Behram Malbari, the poet, was one of the earliest Indians to write in English, Malbari's *The Indian Muse in English Garb* was published in 1877. Though Malbari cannot, strictly speaking, be called a novelist, his collection of twenty-six sketches: *Gujarat and Gujaratis* (1882) and *The Indian Eye on English Life* (1895) are pseudo-fictional in nature. Cornelia Sorabji, whose Parsi father had converted to Christianity, was brought up on the English language and in an English atmosphere,

chose to teach in India and later became a lawyer who crusaded for the cause of Indian women. She published three volumes of short stories, *Love and Life Behind the Purdah* (1901) *Sun Babies* (1904) and *Between the Twilights* (1908). She also wrote two autobiographical books, *India Calling* (1935) and *Indian Recalled* (1936.) D.F. Karaka jr. though better known as a journalist, has also written some novels in the 1940s. and 50s.

In the sketches, stories and novels, written during the early and middle years of Indian English Fiction, there is not much stress on the Parsi identity of the authors. The identity of the Parsi, as a distinct ethno-religious minority in India has not been highlighted. It is only in the recent novels written by the Parsis that one finds a definite assertion of ethnic identity. It is in the novels and short stories of Bapsi Sidhwa, Farrukh Dhondy, Rohinton Mistry, Firdaus Kanga and Boman Desai that the ethnic uniqueness of the Parsi community is focused upon.

This raises several important questions: Why do Parsi novelists today feel the need to assert their Parsi identity? What is a Parsi identity? Is it different from an Indian identity? How is it different? The assertion of an ethnic Parsi identity also raises the related question of how a heightened awareness of ethnicity correlates to assimilation into the Indian context or in the case of Parsis who live in the West, in an expatriate milieu.

The present day Parsis are descendants of the Zoroastrians who fled from Iran around 800 A.D. after its invasion by the Arabs. They fled to avoid forcible conversion to Islam and took refuge in Gujarat, on the Western coast of India. Here they adopted the local language and dress, eschewed the path of war and foreswore proselytization. These were the conditions upon which they were granted refuge by the King of Sanjan, Jadav Rana. Between this time and the advent of the British in India, the Parsis appear to have led a fairly quiet life.

In British India, unhampered by the taboos of the Hindu caste system and the isolationism of the Muslims, the Parsis surged ahead and became the most Westernised of all Indian communities. This not only alienated them from the Indian mainstream, but also cut them off from their own Parsi roots. Now in the last quarter of the twentieth century, the Parsis are in demographic and social decline. They are a minuscule minority in India and number around 80,000 only. Late marriages, marriages outside the community by Parsi women, whose children are then not accepted as Parsis and a low birth rate, have resulted in a situation where the laws of statistics dictate the eventual annihilation of race. It is in such a life-and-death situation that the Parsi community is making its last grand stand, asserting its glorious Persian past and its 1300-year-old Indian association. It is this assertion of Parsi identity that we find reflected in recent fiction written by Parsis.

The Parsi identity, its essential sameness, encompasses its religion, its ethnicity, its history and its consciousness of an elite status. Being a Parsi means being a Zoroastrian, a follower of Zarathustra, who preached the world's first monotheistic religion, somewhere between the 5th and 6th centuries before Christ. Parsis have retained their ethnicity, racial separateness, in spite of their 1300 years long span on the Indian sub-continent. Even today, most Parsis tend to look different from their fellow-Indians. This racial purity has been maintained by endogamy. Marriages outside the Parsi community were strictly discouraged and in keeping with the promise given to Jadav Rana, no conversions to Zoroastrianism have been allowed.

Although visionary Parsis such as Dadabhai Naoroji and Firozshah Mehta had joined the India mainstream, the majority of Parsis during the National Movement in India felt alienated from the Indian context and sought an identity outside the Indian society. This dilemma had not arisen earlier as a commonly spelt out Indian identity was forged by Indian nationalists only towards the end of the Nineteenth century. After the independence of India, the exalted social position enjoyed by Parsis during the Raj, has been eroded and Parsis have been marginalized in independent India. This has galled the community as a whole as its elite consciousness has not been acknowledged by the new rulers of India.

Parsis are today, trying to reorient themselves to this new much reduced role. Some seek to assimilate themselves into the Indian mainstream by adopting Indian culture and jettisoning their Parsi identity. Others in a bid to escape this new, not welcome, change of status, move to the West. They too abandon their Parsi identity. Both courses are fraught with danger as it is the steadfastness with which Parsis have clung to their unique identity which has ensured their separate preservation in the all embracing Indian ethos. Parsis who have moved towards west, find that in the land of the

whites, they hold no unique position. They are lumped together with the Brown races and known as the Asiatics. This is an identity they have never considered. This then delays their assimilation into the new expatriate milieu.

Indian Parsi writers have made remarkable contributions to the country's literature. They ventured into creative writing and attempted to exhibit the Parsi race to the rest of the world. From among the top Parsi writers writing in English, Rohinton Mistry, Firdaus Kanga, Farukh Dhondy, Bapsi Sidhwa and Boman Desai are the prominent names.

Boman Desai's *The Memory of Elephants* (1988) concerns itself most directly with the question of Parsi identity. It focuses on all four elements of their identity - religion, ethnicity, history and consciousness of the elite status. Technically too, it is, barring Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice-Candy Man*, the most ambitious of all the recent novels written by Parsis. Desai's protagonist, Homi, lives in a disoriented world upon which the memo-scan gives Homi, the memory of , the memory of whales, the equation of the universe. The memo-scan is the instrument which activates the collective unconscious of the Parsis, what Homi's Bapaji, grandmother, calls the memory of the soul. Homi had hooked himself on to the memo-scan in a fit of self-destruction, but instead of reliving the moments of love-making with the American girl who had then rejected him, Homi is privileged to live the past of all Parsis. By emerging from the maelstrom of a personal and racial crisis, Homi becomes confident of his own salvation as well as that of his race. By understanding the Parsi past as well as his own, he comes to terms: with the present, just as the Parsi community could also adjust to present day realities by comprehending the make-up of its identity. In this sense *The Memory of Elephants* becomes one of the earliest Parsi allegories.

The Historical detailing gives way to the establishment of ethnicity and the memo-scan shows us the peculiar characteristics of Parsi life, first in Naysari in Gujarat and then in Bombay. The Navjote ceremony is highlighted. This is the religious ceremony at, which is when all Parsis are initiated into Zoroastrianism and is crucial to the 'we-consciousness'. The death rites, the unique Tower of Silence, are described, Parsi cuisine and its distinct flavour brought out.

Most Parsis today are closer to Rusi, Homi's younger brother, who is enchanted with all western things. America is the new El Dorado for such Parsis, the Promised Land after that cherished England, after she closed its doors to all Asian immigrants. Rusi experiences difficulties in being accepted by White American society. To this society, he is as much a foreigner as is any other Asiatic, even if he has been brought up on a diet of American films and had pretensions to being a Hippie. This is a situation which faces most Parsi youth in the West. They reject their Parsi identity and choose to go and live in the West, but to the Westerners, they are unacceptable as are other Indians—an identity they have never accepted while in India.

The allegorical action of the novel is resolved into two distinct realities. The stay-at-home Parsi, attuned to an Indian existence and the Westward-ranging Parsi assimilated into the expatriate ethos. Both these Parsis, however, retain their Parsi identities. The novel is resolved into two distinct realities. The stay-at-home Parsi, attuned to an Indian existence and the Westward-ranging Parsi assimilated into the expatriate ethos.

Bapsi Sidhwa, being a Parsi has introduced the Parsi community in her novels. In her first novel the *Crow Eaters* (1978) and her third novel the *Ice-Candy Man* (1990), the assertion of Parsi identity is particularly strong. The novels exhibit varying degrees of assimilation into the sub-continental milieu sustaining their Parsi identity. Like Desai, Sidhwa also establishes her Parsi identity in the very opening pages of this novel. However, unlike Desai's, this, first Sidhwa - novel is a straight-forward, traditionally structured narrative. Faredoon, jungle-walla, Freddy for short, is among the pioneering Parsis at the turn of the century. He transports his family in an ox-cart from Gujarat to Lahore. He, like many other Parsis, was following the British flag in search of trade. Freddy's identification with the British Raj is strong and here he represents the majority of pre-independence Parsis. Faredoon Junglewalla has a definite bias for everything British. Freddy also has a sharp elite consciousness. In a multi-religious Lahore, Freddy and his family enjoy superior status by virtue of being Parsis. Freddy's Parsi identity, however, still does not include the English language. So, *The Crow-Eaters*, is rich in Parsi idioms; the highly evocative Parsi Gujarati is translated into English by Sidhwa and a ,rip-rollicking pace is set for the action.

Mr. Junglewalla's saga is a comic one, even an essentially satiric one, but includes all the serious elements of Parsi identity assertion. The Parsi death rites, the vultures pecking at the Parsi dead are

brought in, as is religious history and Zoroastrian tolerance. This is done in the form of authorial descriptions and comments. Desai has done this in the stream-of-consciousness type of interior monologue or used Bapaiji as his mouthpiece.

Parsi alienation from mainstream Indian culture and fascination with things Western is satirized in Freddy's hilarious attempts at quoting English proverbs. This alienation is also underlined in the Junglewalla family's horror when their son Yazdi wants to marry an Anglo-Indian girl and mingle his pure Persian blood with her 'mongrel' blood. The novel ends on a rather ambiguous note. The Junglewalla family is definitely at home in India and not in the West. However, this India is on the verge of being torn apart by Hindus and Muslims. Faredoon Junglewalla, like most Parsis, remains aloof from the Freedom Movement. Secure in his religious exclusivity, and the immunity, it offers against violence and death, he sits back and is ready to let Hindus and Muslims battle over India.

This assimilation, however, is not at the cost of deracination. Her other novel, *Ice-Candy Man* (1990) reverts to Parsi characters. The novel has Parsi characters, but they are to varying degrees integrated into the pre-partition Indian context. Also, although the action is seen through a little Parsi girl, Lenny's eyes, the events are of broader significance. They are intimately connected with it and sometimes even initiate it. However, like Desai's *The Memory of Elephants* and Rushdie's *Shame* (1983), it is also moral allegory. Although Sidhwa is not really an expatriate writer, she did, write *Ice-Candy Man* in the United States and now divides her time between Pakistan and that country. Having worked out the assertion of the Parsi identity from her system, being established her assimilation into the Pakistani context; she is able to deftly handle the complex theme of *Ice-Candy Man*.

Interwoven into the dark and sordid tale of political betrayal and rape, is Lenny's childhood and her Parsi Identity. The Parsi ethos is not stressed but subtly interwoven into the narrative. Lenny, the maimed child, is at once autobiographical as well as metaphorical. The maimed child could also be a metaphor for the maimed, fragile Parsi identity. Lenny's Disease itself could also be symbolic of the disease that was eating into the body politic of India.

In this novel Sidhwa also confronts the issue of how the Parsi identity was going to cope with the changes on the political front. This question is discussed at the meeting of Lahore Parsis, chaired by Col. Bharucha, Lenny's doctor. At dais meeting, the neutral stand of the Parsis towards the about-to-be-born new nations is justified by a reiteration of the saga of Parsis being granted refuge at Sanjan. The condition of not bearing arms imposed upon the refugees is also invoked, as is the vulnerability of a minority. With the creation of the new Muslim state, Lenny's world shrinks, it loses its Hindus and Sikhs. Thus, the Parsi identity in newly-created Pakistan, is also a loser and becomes a reductive entity.

Farrukh Dhondy's short fiction and novel can be compared to Sidhwa's fiction. The Parsi identity is asserted in the early collection of short stories, *Poona Company* (1980), but the subsequent collections of short stories and the novel: *Bombay Duck* (1990) exhibit increasing degrees of the assimilation into the expatriate ethos. This assimilation is again not at the cost deracination and Parsi characters, and Parsi identities are an integral part of this later fiction too. Dhondy does not present detailed explanations of Parsi identity or Parsi exotica. However this does not mean that the characteristic nuances of Parsi identity are totally ignored in. Dhondy's fiction. The Parsi nostalgia for the British Raj is noted as are the Parsi death rites. However, the Parsi custom of leaving their dead to be devoured by birds of prey is neither glorified nor censured as in Sidhwa and Desai respectively. It is merely presented through the eyes of the 'Khandia', to whom it is only a job.

Rohinton Mistry is another expatriate Parsi writer who is now settled in Canada, His first collection of short stories, *Tales From FirozshaBaag* (1987), centrestages the Parsi identity. They highlight the eccentric side of this identity. Mistry's *Firozsha Baag* is a middle class Parsi housing estate, half-way between the upper class world of Sidhwa and Desai and Dhondy's Sarbatwala Chowk. It is a ghetto-like world which is cocooned from the realities of Indian existence. It is a world of fire temples, 'dastoorjis' i.e. priests, the idiosyncrasies of colourful Parsi men and women, of Parsi customs and Parsi cuisine. For this world about the only contact with India comes through the Indian servant the ubiquitous 'Ganga', the maid and the 'boy' Ganga is covertly lusted after, and the 'boy' is exploited. In 'Auspicious Occasion', Rustomji, the main protagonist, expresses the

general Parsi view of most Indian being 'uneducated, filthy, ignorant barbarians'. Rustomji's encounter with the 'ghaati' a derogatory term for Indian, also focusses on the confrontation between Parsi identity and the Indian identity. It also symbolises the social decline of the 'Bawaji', who in the British Raj, was a 'Sahib', but has now become a figure of fun; somebody who can be spat upon with impunity. It is this distance between the Parsi elite consciousness and their downgraded position in independent India that the migrant Parsi is also trying to escape. The Parsi world of Firozsha Baagis out of tune with the Indian reality. .

Lend me Your Light is a crucial story about the alienation of Paris from all things Indian and their fascination with all things foreign. In this story, this attitude results in a deep-seated guilt in the protagonist. He says: "I am guilty of the sin of hubris for seeking emigration out of the land of your birth, and paying the price in burnt-out eyes." I am Tiresias, bind and throbbing between two lives; the one is Bombay and the one to come in Toronto.

Finally, FirdausKanga's *Trying to Grow* (1990), which is a tenderly, funny autobiographical novel, has the first-time novelist asserting his Parsi identity on the very first page of his novel. The clash between this identity and encroaching Hindu spiritualism, which contemporary Parsis, in spite of their elite consciousness, find very attractive, is also announced at the very outset.

Brit, the hero, his sister Dolly and their parents Sera and Sam are Bombay Parsis. Sera is the archetypal Parsi who displays the Parsi antipathy towards milked marriages and alienation from post-independence India. Sera's Persian heritage is stressed and is related to that of the Jews, who like the Parsis had also been in Diaspora. The Parsi nostalgia for the British Raj is concretized and further accentuated in Brit's grandmother's British lover. The fascination for all things Western is also noted in the fact that Sera's legs are compared to Betty Grable's and Sam is a Gregory Peck. look-a-like. The novel abounds in Parsi characters and the religious, historical and ethnic features of Parsi identity are very subtly introduced into the narrative without any overt rally.

Thus, it can be observed that these Parsi writers somehow feel the need to bring the till now silent Parsi culture before the world. The Parsi voice in recent Indian-English fiction has been raised to assert the Parsi ethnic identity. It is only by understanding, accepting one's own ethnicity that assimilation into a wider social, national context becomes possible. This is clearly seen in the development of fiction of Sidhwa and Mistry. Assimilation into the wider social context is present in the writings of Dhondy and Kanga. Desai's memo-scans provides the all-important racial memory which enables Parsis to fit into either the Indian or Expatriate setting. With the spate of these novels which focus on the Parsi identity, the Parsi Connection' has truly arrived in Indian-English fiction.

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