

Locating Parsee Identity in the Twenty First Century Indian English Fiction

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T.M. Luhrmann in his seminal book *The Good Parsi* has traced out the journey of Parsees from dispersion to the settlement in different countries across the globe, and also have noted their concerns towards the countries they got settled. I was going through this book and also working on a project in the area I was curious to know more about their hidden anguishes and emotional bondings towards the homeland and the target land. Thus, I have shared Luhrmann's survey which he had made during his field work. He says:

“It seemed to me that the American- based Parsis were, generally speaking, concerned with very different problems than were the Bombay Parsis. They had begun the complex process of “repositioning” their community sensibility, and they seemed to lack the harsh self-criticism of the Bombay community living in the shadow of a glorious past.(viii)

Meanwhile, he has focussed on the journey of Parsis when they got uprooted from their homeland Iran, as declared Zarathustra it was almost 1200 years back when they were attacked by the then Muslims who forced them either to migrate themselves or assimilate to the Muslim religion which they did not accept as it was against their culture. In this regard, Zoroastrians had a clear view and agenda that they should preserve their culture and identity otherwise they would be chutnised in the bigger societies. Hence, when they came to India in search of a safer place as an asylum they requested the then king Jadav Rana for giving them freedom to preserve their religion and belief system which the king accepted with certain promises vowed by Parsees. The first promises he had taken from Parsees was to venerate cows of the country as they are pious and annexed to the environment of the country second they should surrender their arms which they have carried from their homeland third they should respect the religion of the country and fourth that they would not celebrate anything after ten o'clock. On all these issues they were agreed but they had also their promises which were to be accepted by the king. Among them the most significant was of their religious freedom along with cultural freedom which was accepted. Parsees declared that they are

peace loving people they would never create problem for any one of this country as they have come to this country with single agenda to preserve their exclusive culture and identity. They also proved themselves with more sanctity when they put a glass full of water in which they poured down some sugar and stirred it and said that earlier it was just water but now it has been changed into sherbet so they will assimilate themselves in the country with lots of sweetness. Such promises were kept by them in words as well as sentiments.

As one can see in my paper I have commenced my view on the agenda of reviewing the condition of Parsees those migrated to the USA and those migrated to India how they found the country and how did they respond to the sentiments of their respective societies. In this regard my point is this that both countries cannot be put together as India has plural culture and societies are also divided in different pockets someone may call them caste, creed, community, class and so on while the USA has a different background of the societal framework. Hence, there is need to study all the issues pertaining to the assimilation of Parsees into these lands.

I wish to mention a column which I read in the *Times of India* on 20 Sept. 2017 shows that Parsi men have always written the rules, which discriminate against women. But as a dwindling minority group, Parsis will resist the bulldozing of their cultural norms. In the same column Mitra sharafi extended the same through her article (*TOI*, 20 Sept. 2017) “Many think Parsis are a model minority. Are they? With the above article the author has placed some debatable questions before the society and says that Parsi personal laws also do not follow all the principles mentioned in the legal book. She says:

The characterisation of Parsi matrimonial law as a model personal law overlooks the troubling tradeoffs made in Parsi legal history. Some products of this history, like the matrimonial definition of grievous hurt, remain with us today. Conversations about the UCC should look beyond Muslim matrimonial law to consider the fraught history of other bodies of personal law, too. (*TOI*, P. 11)

In another article in the same edition of the newspaper, Homiar Nariman Vakil in his article entitled “Why Parsis Need Their Distinct Family Laws” says that Parsis are what they are because they are ethnically exclusive. They are a tiny community, whose ancestors came to India due to religious persecutions in Persia (Iran). Their numbers are down to a critical

61000 and diminishing by the day.” And further he defines that problem in his own words and says: “There is no legal adoption amongst Parsis and therefore if a Parsi couple decides to adopt a child, he or she would not enjoy automatic rights of inheritance. Who can be a member of a particular religious denomination, or who can have a right to insist on being a member and be entitled to the use of religious institutions, is determined by the personal law of that denomination, which in turn is based on the precepts, beliefs and tenets of the religion.”

Besides the above, other rituals are also very restrictive and confined which do not allow to have intercaste or interfaith marriages. Homiar says:

The children of a Parsi Zoroastrian man who married outside the community can become a Parsi, but not the children of a Parsi woman married to a non-Parsi. Some women in the community have questioned this and taken the matter to courts. R.D. Tata had married a French woman who had embraced the Zoroastrian religion and had a Navzote. He pleaded that this meant she could enter an Agyari and be consigned to the Tower of Silence after her death. However, there was no uproar from orthodox Parsis, and the High Court then ruled in their favour. Parsis, being one of India’s most progressive communities, are used to this conflict between liberal and orthodox viewpoints. The enforcement of a Uniform Civil Code will not be easy with most communities, especially in a secular country like India.(TOI, P.11)

When we compare modern Parsis with those Parsis who came for the first time to India and then spread to the rest of the world is very changed as the modern one adopted all those changes in its ambit and became more westernized than the average Indians. So there is a deep change came from every spheres of the society and it is not only in India but in the whole world due to the globalization of the opportunities. Parsis grabbed all those opportunities in their own way. Hence they moved out foreign lands in the search of better opportunities. Now they feel marginalized in the postcolonial world as they left the land along with social and cultural responsibilities. Modern Anthropologists also had not expected such types of changes in the community as they assess in the present state. They state:

Like the Parsis, to the degree that they live within the historical constraints of their past ambitions, with nostalgia or with anger, they suffer; but in refashioning themselves to the new historical realities, they flourish. At the end of this analysis, then, I intend to draw the parallel with the repositioning of anthropology in late-twentieth-century America. (2)

Consequently, most of the Parsis came to India and settled down in Bombay and they are more than any other countries of the world in number. They are approximately sixty thousand while in the other countries less than this demography. They took colonial part of India as loss of home, loss of confidence, and the loss of selfhood. Apart from India wherever they went had a situation of hallucination as well as hollowness of the time. They still struggle for identity and ownness. Cultural stiffness has also been a reason of their dislocation and separateness. In this context, I can quote some of the luminaries of the community such as Bapsi Sidhwa, Rohinton Mistry, Keki N. Daruwalla who had given their views about the community and also have traced out bigger challenges of the future. Sidhwa in her a seminal book *The Crow Eaters* which she had written in eighties talked about the hidden feature of the community for which she was criticised by the community. Actually the title of the book had made a lot of controversy among the Parsees when they came to know that the book was defining a different image of the Parsees which is not good for the society. The Crow Eaters is a practise of the community to give their final remains to the vultures and crows through the ‘Tower of Silence’, they feed to the creatures for two reasons; one they are philanthropic to the society so they want to feed them and the second it is environment friendly for cleanliness. But Bapsi Sidhwa had not used this practise in the accordance of traditional rites she had used it in the practise of their one of the features of being much talkative like a crow ‘caw’, ‘caw’. But the former was received by the community. I wish to quote an extract of the book which shows their inclination towards the community. In an interview with David Montenegro she talked about her difficulties she faced during the book launch, *The Crow Eaters*:

The book launch took place at an international hotel in Lahore, and, since there are not so many books written in English launched, it was quite a function, with a lot of writers and eminent people reading out papers on the book and all that sort of the thing. And there was a bomb threat, which subsequently I realized was

from Parsi who felt very strongly about the book. It took me some time to realize what the turmoil the book had created within the community. They thought I was revealing secrets that I had no business giving out....And they felt I was damaging the image. But this is a typical reaction, I think, for anybody who breaks new ground in a community like this. They felt threatened by it, although it was written out of great affection. (33)

Sidhwa had raised other issues of the community which showed how did they replicate to the existing government in their own way as they knew the truth that they were small in number so that they should not take the side of anyone else they will be chutnised. So in this way they were very clever. They did not take part with either Hindus or Muslims. They posed themselves as neutral people. It is said about the community which is very popular that those Parsees were in Lahore stood by Muslims and those were in Bombay were with Hindus. As they had no own agenda so they were neutral to both. They said they went to the world just for preserving their culture and identity and nothing else. Parsee's leader Faredoon Junglewalla also approved it and suggested everyone in spirit and faith.

In *Ice-Candy Man*, Sidhwa reveals community's commitment in an exclusive manner.

Thus:

‘Let whoever wishes rule! Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Christian! We will abide by the rules of their land!’ A polite smattering of Hear hears! The congregation, wafted on self-esteem and British proverbs, does not want to be brought back to earth. (39)

On the other hand, we have small traces of their submissiveness towards their homeland, Iran(Persia) from where they came had a very positive and excellent addition in their societal talks. I would like to give a small space for that so that we could learn about their openness and progressiveness attitude to everyone whether it is about their people or someone else.

Thus:

‘I’ll tell you a story,’ the colonel says, and susceptible to stories the congregation and I sit still in our seats. ‘When we were kicked out of Persia by the Arabs thirteen hundred years ago, what did we do? Did we shout and argue? No!’ roars the colonel, and hastily provides his own answer before anyone can interrupt.

‘We got into boats and sailed to India!’ ‘Why to India?’ a totally new wit sitting at the end of my bench enquires. ‘If they had to go some place why not Greece? Why not to France? Prettier scenery...’ (*Ice-Candy-Man*,38)

With the above statement and view it has been very much clear that they had least interest in the power politics of the time else they had single agenda how to save themselves from all the communal and cultural traumas. Sidhwa has also given similar views in her book *The Pakistani Bride* and she says that the partition of the country had affected a lot the communities in those days but Parsee people were not affected much as they had not played active role in the partition from either side. In *An American Brat* she has talked about the fundamentalists rule towards everyone living across the country and it was binding for all the communities to be bound. Consequently, Zareen decided that her daughter should be sent to the cosmopolitan country, the USA where one can do according to his/her wishes. This country will broaden her mind. She can start living like a free bird. In Pakistan, she was taught to live with the principle of religion and one who does not belong to the same religion cannot survive in the land. Therefore, Feroza was sent to the foreign land in the search of real education which she was not getting in her country. Zareen finds restless when Feroza forbids her mother to come to school in a dress that is not allowed:

“In the car she said: ‘Mummy, please don’t come to school dressed like that.’ She objected to my sleeveless sari-blouse! Really, this narrow-minded attitude touted by General Zia is infecting her, too. I told her: ‘Look, we’re Parsee, everybody knows we dress differently.’ “When I was her age, I wore frocks and cycled to Kinnaird College. And that was in ’59 and 60’- fifteen years after partition! Can she wear frocks? No. Women mustn’t show their legs, women shouldn’t dress like this, and women shouldn’t look like that. Girls mustn’t play hockey or sing or dance! If everything corrupts their pious little minds so easily, then the *Mullahs* should wear *burqas* and stay within the four walls of their houses!”(10)

In *An American Brat* the writer has highlighted the Parsee culture and at the same time has also talked about the Pakistani Radical Fundamentalists rule over Pakistan and its people which forbid the minimum individual freedom to live and survive. Feroza and Zareen belong to the Parsee culture so they are taught everything in free environment but in Pakistan they

find themselves sandwiched under the ghettoes of the cultural baggage. In this article, I have forged an attempt to understand the various issues of the cultural tensions and finally they had to live on own terms and they never made it a controversy as they were peace loving people.

Howsoever they had accommodated themselves with their existing country for their survival and exclusive belief system. Some of the Parsis are still struggling with the olden tradition of the community where intercommunity marriages are not allowed and those people have done have lost their recognition in the community, is a big challenge for the present society. The world has no borders in the case of opportunities people are grabbing transcending the imaginary boundaries. Hence, the emerging issues are a big challenge for the people of this faith to be annexed with their roots. Changes and challenges should be adopted or at least be liberal for repositioning the cultural baggage they had carried from Persia.

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