

The Ethnic Identity of Parsi Community and Voice of Women in Parsi Writings

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Abstract

Literature enables us to understand the history and culture of different communities. While we read a book, it projects the life of people in a different era. To know the culture, tradition, and norms of different community or tribe the best ways accessible is to read a book. When we look into the ethnic identity of Parsi community, it is completely different from other communities. The Parsi community is going to disappear because of migration and westernization. To keep the identity and tradition of the Parsis, Parsi writers are trying to bring the cultural heritage of the community into mainstream society through their writings. Parsi writers are totally different from other writers because they always try to involve the reader in their culture. Women identity is not much explored by the writers, only some writers tried to bring out the identity of Parsi women in their works. When we read the works of Parsi writers, we will understand the ethnicity, identity and tradition of the Parsi community. The writers chosen for my study are Rohinton Mistry, Boman Desai, Ardish Vakil, Cyrus Mistry and Bapsi Sidhwa, This research paper is an attempt to explore the ethnic identity of Parsi Community and voice of women in selected Parsi writings.

Key Terms: *Ethnicity, Identity, Parsi Culture, Women, Mistry*

Parsis are the group of people from Iran (Persia) who escaped from the hands of Muslims and migrated to other countries to keep their own religious identity. Major group of Parsi communities are living in Pakistan and India; In India majority of the Parsis are settled in Mumbai, Kolkata and Bengaluru. The Parsis have their own Fire temple, Tower of Silence and Dharmashala in which only their community people are allowed. Fire temple is the place where they go to worship. The fire in the fire temple is very old as they brought it from their country

which shows that wherever they live, they are never out from their customs and rituals.

Ethnic Identity of Parsi community:

“Ethnicity” is a term used to represent a group of people sharing the same culture, tradition and nation. According to Paul Spoonley, Ethnicity is “the positive feelings of belonging to a cultural group”. The term “ethnicity” means identifying a group of people based on similarities of their language, culture, religion, history, homeland, society or nation. According to

John .J. Macionies, Ethnicity is “a shared cultural heritage, People define themselves- or others-as members of ethnic category based on having common ancestors, language, or religion that confers a distinctive social identity”. According to Webster, Identity means “the distinguishing character or personality of an individual”. Ethnic identity is about the group of people who wants other communities to know and respect their community. It is mainly about the minority communities who try to tell about their pride history, culture, customs and tradition to other people of the country and to recognize as one among them. It is the inheritance of the place or society that they live in which shows their ethnic identity. When we look into the works of Parsi writers we can find that how they are trying to show the society about the problems faced by the people and their community. All the writers are against corruption, untouchability, exploitation of women and illiteracy.

The Parsi people are the members of Zoroastrian community. They have their own customs, rituals and religious beliefs. The culture and tradition of Parsi community have altered as they migrated from different places but still they kept their customs and tradition alive. Settling in India influenced them and it was easy for them to understand and join hands with the Indian culture. Certain rituals were changed because of their adaption to Indian culture. The changes they brought included abstaining from eating the beef and pork as it was against the culture of Hindus and Muslims. There are some culture and practices they borrowed from Indians too.

Parsis are known for their knowledge and wisdom in different fields. They can proudly say that the Parsis here are involved in creating bringing about major educational, economical and political changes in India. These changes show that how the Parsis want to be one among the Indians. It shows their love for the places they live in and they cooperated with other communities for the development of the country and their common community environment. We can see the ethnic identity and voice of women through the works of Parsi writers like Rohinton Mistry, Boman Desai, Ardish Vakil, Cyrus Mistry and Bapsi Sidwa, to name a few. These writers have tried to keep their minority community alive through their writings.

Cyrus Mistry, who is a playwright, author and brother of Rohinton Mistry and has written some short stories and novels, in his novel *Chronicle of Corpse Bearer* he tells us about the Parsi community and the life of a Khandhais, they are known as; who carries the bodies of the dead for burial. He projects the rich cultural practices in the Parsi Community. The corpse bearers are treated as the untouchables of the Parsi community because of the work they do. He clearly shows the impact of the Parsi community on partition of Bombay and the life of Parsi priest and corpse bearer. In *The Radiance of Ashes*, Mistry tells about the real life of a common man with the political problems and communal riots which affect the ordinary people.

Boman Desai’s works are about the reality of the Post-colonial Era. He brings out the migration and traditional life of Parsis in his novels. In his work *The Memory of*

Elephants he narrates traditional values of the Parsi community and their history. In his novel *Asylum*, character *Noshir* tells us about the life of a Parsi who tries to be a part of American Culture but could not leave the roots of his own culture. Noshir never becomes conscious of his Parseeness or his religious identity as a Zoroastrian. It was difficult for him to understand where he really stands -

“it is better to reign in Hell than to serve in Haven, but I don’t know Don’t get me wrong. I am not saying India is Hell. It’s more spiritual country than America” (17)

Ardish Vakil is a Parsi writer who wrote some short stories and two famous novel *Beach Boy* and *One day*. In his work he describes the human relationships and how Parsi people in India are struggling with the customs and traditions. He focuses on Parsi tradition, identity and ethnicity of the community. In his novel *Beach Boy* he speaks about a Parsi boy who is largely westernized. It portrays the ethnic aspects and identity. How the boy Cyrus tries to mingle with the larger community. Cyrus says about the ethnic identity of his community by explaining it in a way that a small boy can understand about the community practises. The other rituals and customs of the Parsi have been brought out by the character Aunt Zenobia in this novel.

Vakil tries to show us how the culture and ritual of his community by saying—

“We are Zoroastrians, like Topiwalas, the Bottle openerwalas, the Baltiwalas, the lawyers (or vakils)..... We are all named after the vacations of their ancestors, we pray at agiarys-temples where same flame

has kept burning from hundreds of years... we offer our dead to the vultures on the top of the Malbar Hill in huge stadium-sized wells called the Tower of Silence.”[Vakil, 17]

His work *One day*, deals with the relationship of the couples and its effect on multiculturalism and loss of identity. The character of Priya, shows how ethnic identity of own community is important as she feels she not belonged to anywhere in this world. She was haunted by her motherland, she says –

“How far I have moved from my roots. [Vakil, 221]

The loss of ethnic identity in Parsi community is mainly because of the inter-cast, inter-religious marriages and migration. If a Parsi marries from other religion, she/he losses the rights from visiting fire temple or Tower of Silence in the event of his/her parents death, it can be taken as cruelty but it is their cultural custom. So it is probably difficult to preserve their community. Migration can be taken as one of the reason as they loss their identity in the third world and they are not welcomed in their Motherland, this makes them to follow both culture in the margin that they set for themselves. Most of the Parsi writers are trying to preserve the community by bringing out the history of their tradition and culture, which is on the verge of vanishing.

Voice of Women in Parsi Writings:

Woman characters in Literature are always depends on the social customs and situations of certain place they live in. The Portrayal of

Parsi women is given as traditional and cultural homemaker. They try to be away from the scene most of the time which shows that they are not given much importance but only as a caretaker of the family. These women never tried to find their identity or went against the family for their benefits which tells how much they are involved into a family structure. Their voice is unheard in the community.

Bapsi Sidhwa brings out the life of Parsis in a different way .We can see the fear of a Parsi family to get along with the other communities, social and political conditions, women specific problems, migration and partition crisis are the highlights of her works. Bapsi Sidhwa's novel *The Pakisatani Bride* is a true story about the women in Pakistan. It provides the reader with images of Pakistani women and the way they are treated by others. It mainly shows the women who lost their identity and tries to be independent. *The Crow Eaters* is about the cultural identity and social mobility of the Parsi community. Sidhwa explains about how the women are treated because of the natural process.

“Every Parsi household has its other room, specially reserved for women. Thither they are banished for the duration of their unholy state. Even the sun, moon and stars are defiled by her impure gaze, according to the superstition which has its source in primitive man's fear of blood”. (70)

In Her novel *An American Brat* she writes about a Pakistani Parsi girl Feroza, her stable attitude creates fear to her mother and sends her for a holiday to America. Feroza tries to be independent instead of staying

with her parents. Her love towards Jew boy creates problem in her family because of the inter religious marriage issue of the Parsi community. It clearly shows how women are not able to take decision in their life. In the novel *Water* Sidhwa explains about the issues faced by a widow Chuyia, the way widows are treated in the Indian society. How widows struggle to accept the fate and her struggles to fit in the society. *Water* is about the inequality of men and women and women should be always under the shadow of men.

“A women is recognized as a person only when she is one with her husband” (15)

Rohinton Mistry is a writer who makes a part of Indian Diaspora. In his works he brings out the ethnicity, identity, social and political image of India, migration, communal riots, untouchability and life of a common Parsi family. His work includes on a complete society and its issues which gives the reality of life in India. Partition of India and emergency period is one of the common issues of people as shown by Mistry. The racism and untouchability is the other major problem in the work of Mistry. Portrayal of women by Mistry has not to a large extent but he has given women a supporting role. Dina Dalal in *A Fine Balance* is a woman who tried to stand up in the patriarchal world by trying to come out from her family and wishing to live without depending on her brother. The novel opens to different situation where she was not able to live by herself. At last she comes back to her brother and stays with his family, Mistry tries to shows that even if women tries to live by themselves it is not be possible and they always need men to support her.

Exploitation of low cast women has been given a main focus in some of the works of Mistry. The other women characters are Roshana, Dilnawaz, Mehroo, Lucy, Yasmin, Coomy and Miss. Kutpitia are portrayed as sisters, wives and widows which makes them to be oriented to their family.

To conclude, the ethnicity of Parsi culture can be seen in all the works of Parsi writers in India. This shows that they want their community to be alive. These writers are trying to preserve their community by bringing out the history of Parsis. Their tradition and culture is completely different from others. Parsis are ready to accept the multiculturalism across India but they want their own ethnic identity to be preserved. The works of Parsi writers are not only about their culture or tradition but they bring out the complete structure of the society they live in. Women are always out of gaze when we notice the works of Parsi writers. When we look into the culture and tradition of Parsis by different authors it is easy to understand the way they projected them and how they have strenuously tried to keep their identity and their community practices alive. It is not easy for any community to be a part of another different society, by

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leaving their own cultural legacy completely and joining with the foster community culture, but the Parsis in India are strong and independent after adaption process.

Women characters are hard to find in the Parsi writings as they are always under the veil of collective identity. Women in Parsi writings are used only as supporting role which makes them to be inside the family. The difference that we found in Parsi culture from other culture is that they are not against the empowerment of women. We can find social and political evils like corruption, illiteracy, unemployment, racism in the works of these writers. Their self awareness that they are also a part of a society can be seen in their works. These things will bring to a conclusion that how the Parsi people are in reality and how much they respect and adore the place they live. It can be any place that they have migrated to; they will show their gratitude to the place. Most of the Parsis are successful economically and financially. They love to keep their ethnic identity as they are on the verge of vanish. Their culture and tradition teaches about purity and charity. The good way to live is by helping others which is a real teaching of Parsi Community.

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