

The Quest for Identity: Parsi Culture and Sensibility in the Works of Playwrights Gieve Patel and Cyrus Mistry

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Abstract

This paper closely looks at the works of two Parsi playwrights namely Gieve Patel and Cyrus Mistry who are both candid, confessional at the same time sensitive towards their own community members who are still trapped and burdened by the memory of pledge, undertaken centuries ago by their ancestors in return of the asylum provided the host country. The paper scrutinizes how there is very little of 'accommodating space' for the other in the postcolonial era which also happens one to be of the essential features of globalization and cosmopolitanism.

The association of Parsi community with theatre has been long standing. It is from this community that a number of prominent writers, producers, directors and brilliant actors have emerged. The Parsis have, traditionally, been a privileged minority, in terms of economic and cultural status. Most of the Parsi fiction writers like Rohinton Mistry, Firdaus Kanga, Boman Desai, Thrity Umrigar, Meher Pestonji write out of their roots yet don't remain embedded in them. Many a times, these writers are self-reflective, and their writings reflect on the complexity of their cultural experiences. Essentially many of them have moved beyond the borders of their own cultural identity to incorporate more universal concerns. Parsi writers in postcolonial India often try to repossess their history and display various ethno-religious traits in the course of their writings in order to assert their identity. In this process, various issues concerning the community comes into focus including bans on conversion, late marriages, low birth-rates and marriages outside the Parsi fold.

The Parsi theatre emerged quite early during the colonial rule. There were Parsi playwrights like C.S Nazir who wrote *The First Parsi Baronet* (1866), D.M Wadia who wrote *The Indian Heroine* (1857), P.P Meherji's *Dolly Parsen* (1918). They founded the Parsi Theatre movement which had a major impact on Indian theatre and even cinema. The Parsi Theatre in the late 19th century and 1st quarter of the 20th century operated in Gujarati and Hindustani. None of these texts displayed overt ethno-religious tones. The Parsi muse was happy with the newly emergent nationalist label of Indian – (Talwar 46) The present paper locates the ethno-religious sensibilities in the works of the two Parsi playwrights namely Geive Patel and Cyrus Mistry and tries to explore how it has helped them to shape their cultural identity viz'a vi the larger pan-Indian identity. In a way this paper has also helped me to interrogate the tall claims of liberalism, multiculturalism projected by the state machinery and also critically analyze the representation of Parsi community as drawn by these two playwrights in their works. . The scope of this paper is limited to specific works like *Mr. Behram* by Geive patel and *Doongaji House* by Cyrus Mistry.

After independence, majority of the Parsi playwrights went into a kind of hibernation. The independence of India created a great rift between Hindus and Muslims and the partition forever divided the country into two nations India and Pakistan; the people of both the nations were divided physically and psychologically but in this tug of war, it was the Parsis who were between the devil and the deep sea. This peace loving community did not know whom to affiliate with. Perhaps it is their non-alliance to either of the groups which has led to their triumph. They withdrew into a cocoon of their own and became silent on the matters of politics and communalism. This silence was sometimes punctuated by stray stories and novels in English and plays in Gujarati. This silence ultimately broke in the late 1970's and early 1980's by writers like Rohinton Mistry, Firdaus Kanga, Dina Mehta, Thrity Umrigar and Boman Desai. The writings in the texts of these writers displayed ethno-religious attributes. There was a feeling of alienation and insecurity experienced by diasporic communities.

Amongst the contemporary Parsi playwrights, Cyrus Mistry, Ninaz Khodiji and Zubin Driver are prominent. The previous decades could boast of prolific playwrights like Gieve Patel who was not just a playwright but also a brilliant poet. Cyrus Mistry's first play won him the Sultan Padamsee's award-winning play *Doongaji House* written in 1978. Neither Patel nor Mistry write in the tradition of the old Parsi theatre of colonial India, which had tackled large, epic subjects from Indian history and was nationalistic in tone.

Gieve Patel

Gieve Patel born in Mumbai in 1940 is a general physician, noted poet, playwright and painter. He did his both schooling and college from St. Xavier's, Mumbai. After he finished his M.B.B.S, he joined a primary health centre in Sanjan, a place of great historical significance for the Parsi community. Gieve Patel has written three plays in English like *Princes* (1970), *Savaska* (1982) (performed and published 1989) *Mister Behram* (1988) are focused on the Parsi world. Gieve Patel's *Mr. Behram* is a dark intense play in four acts, cast in classical mould. The play is set in 19th century South- Gujarat where many Parsis have enormous estates. It was an abode to many tribes including the Warlis who used to work in the lands of these Parsi landlords. Gieve Patel came from a fairly middle class background, and he used to come in contact with these Warlis when he visited his grandfather's estate in South Gujarat.

Patel admits in an interview:

I began to see the Warlis in a sociological context- the exploitation, how they had been reduced to bare skin and bones ...there is such a thing as a tribal wave of life and, for a moment I was a part of it. (Parsiana -73)

Mr. Behram, the protagonist of the play is a very well known lawyer and reformist. He adopts a young Warli orphan boy - Naval and the moment he realizes that he has got a brilliant child in his hands, he sends him to school and later on to London to study law. Despite the opposition, many people in the society, he marries off his only daughter Dolly to Naval. As Naval begins to show his talents, the older man feels threatened and he obsessively clings on to his creation and the tragedy begins there.

The language used in the play is very characteristic of the English used by the 19th century elite upper class Parsi household. The Parsis, due to their close connection with the colonizers were adept in the usage of the English language and this flair for English is reflected in their conversations also. The language which they use in their household is a heady mixture of Parsi and Gujarati.

In *Mr. Behram* the protagonist is a mirror image of the colonizer. During the Raj, the colonizers needed efficient, handy men to help them in the smooth functioning of the law and administration. In other words, the Raj needed collaborators to ensure an uninterrupted flow of the colonies wealth into the imperial coffers. For this, among the natives, the Parsis were the best to handle the job efficiently because they were the most sophisticated and most educated members of the Indian society. The British warmly extended hands towards a long term friendship which many of them whole heartedly accepted. While handling many of the key positions in colonial administration; they started developing a sense of power and elite consciousness many of them got fully swayed away as a result of enormous power bestowed upon them. At the same time many of them, like Mr. Behram, also learnt the trade and tricks of the business. It was Behram's growing reputation as a powerful independent- minded lawyer with sympathy towards his own countrymen that became a challenge for the Raj. But towards the end of the play the district collector, Mr. Watts not only sabotages this challenger's case but also his life. The characterization of Mr. Behram shatters the typical stereotype of the Parsi elite aligning with the colonizers.

There are several complex issues which are raised in the play, including the adoption of the tribal boy Naval and his subsequent marriage to Behram's only daughter Dolly. Patel through this Nahnu-Naval incident tries to challenge the existing debate prevalent amongst the Parsi- Zoroastrian community as to whether they should accept outsiders into their fold. Noted critic Nilufer Bharucha has a very interesting view to offer. She is of the opinion that the promises made at the time of refuge in India are today observed more for economic reasons than theological. Historically these promises and self- imposed conditions were a means of protection and self-definition...But today the reasons are very different...During the British colonial period, the Parsis prospered tremendously in economic terms and today the Parsi Panchayat Trust Funds are indeed very rich in terms of property, bonds, shares and even cash. Given the sky-high property prices in Bombay and other metros in India, conversion to Zoroastrianism would give the new converts the right to reside in the sprawling housing complexes owned by the Parsi Panchayats and claim their rights also to their other welfare schemes. This is a scenario not many Parsis would welcome with open arms. (Bharucha 44)

The characterization of Mr. Behram raises questions whether the rules regarding adoption and marriage are the same for everyone irrespective of their class, or are they flexible enough to bend when highly successful men like Behram lobby for their personal interests. Behram, in an attempt to get this Warli tribal boy into Parsi fold, gives him a typical Parsi name Naval. He is totally in love with his creation and is dependent upon his creation to draw love and sustenance. He not only owns Naval's body but also

his mind. Naval is the ultimate source of pride for the colonizer who believes that he is the sole person responsible for turning the 'savage' into 'a civilized individual'. This episode brings into focus how the elitist groups in the colonized societies internalize the coloniser's notions of 'civil' and 'savage'. In order to show-off his prowess of civilizing his protegee, he completely humiliates and strips Naval almost naked in front of the district collector Mr. Watts. He points out to Mr. Watts ,

See that body Mr. Watts! A repository of secrets! Under trousers and suits and the lawyers gown is that essential Warli body. Our bodies Mr. Watts, yours and mine , are dull dough before this vision.- (22)

This reveals the colonial attitude imbibed by Mr. Behram where he automatically assumes 'the colonial gaze'. He also inherits from the colonial masters the orientalist tendency to gather sociological and anthropological information about the colonized thereby classifying, labeling him and turning him into a mere object of study.

In this civilizing project, not only the colonized but also the colonizer becomes the victim of 'dependency complex' whereby Mr. Behram becomes increasingly dependent on Naval's admiration. He isn't happy when anybody else praises him. He tells his wife Rati, "When you praise me, Rati, I feel well and fortified. But when he praises me- I feel giddy delight! .I feel my head should burst with pleasure" – (31)

The play also raises issues of homosexuality. Behram's daughter openly accuses him of it,

You are no different from men who nurture little infants over the years, waiting for unspeakable pleasures that will be theirs when their charges have ripened - (83)

Another important aspect which reflects the Parsi sensibility is the role of women in the play. In the pre-independence era, even though many of the Parsi women were educated and were conversant in the tongue of their colonial masters; they actually didn't play a significant roles outside their home. Of course, there were meritorious women like Meheri Bai who wrote highly feminist prose in order to encourage and inspire women to venture out of the confines of the four walls to experience the life around them. There were also spirited women like Cornelia Sorabji, who used their knowledge of law to help distressed women around them. Women like Bhikhaji Cama unfurled the first Indian flag, there by providing a role model for women to actively participate in the freedom struggle.

Apart from a handful, the majority of Parsi women did not muster courage to revolt against the highly patriarchal Parsi society which believed that women had no business outside their home and their duties merely revolved around the smooth functioning of the household and rearing of the young ones. Gieve Patel's *Mr. Behram* too exemplifies this psychology where by both the women in the play i.e. Rati, wife of Mr. Behram and Dolly, daughter of Mr. Behram are 'silenced' by the male members of the household Behram and Naval. Behram, like most other men of his times internalized has internalized the psychology that women were inferior to men both physically and mentally. In the course of his conversation with his wife Rati he blurts out 'Wives are to be prized, petted, fed, bathed, clothed, like little goddesses. Then of course they should be put to school as well as provided with the best books, to distract their minds from the

horrible education they get from each other, when they are closeted together in their kitchen' – (33)

Behram doesn't consider the opinion of Dolly worthy, even though she too studied law along with Naval. When financial constraints force him to choose between Dolly and Naval, he chooses to support Naval's education over Dolly's. This represents the typical patriarchal attitude whereby female children are cut-off from the resources to provide for the male children. Many other Parsi writers like Rohinton Mistry and Bapsi Sidhwa have exemplified this attitude in their works. When Dolly complains of having nothing to do and expresses her desire to accompany him to the court, Behram lets her do so just to pacify her. His intentions are neither serious nor genuine. Even in the cantonment case when Dolly realizes Behram's folly and points out the opponent's tactics to him, Behram refuses to budge from his stand. Dolly complains to her mother, Rati about the attitude of Behram and Naval in court.

That man Hegde kept talking about triumphs. Mama, there were no triumphs!... All so gleeful that Mr. Behram has ruined his own case and seems not even know it ... and each time I tried to tell Papa and Naval what was happening, they would check me and jeer at me, to indicate to the entire courtroom that a hindering fool of a woman,,, (58)

Dolly is angry with both her husband and father but is incapable of convincing her husband that he has a life and an identity of his own which he should guard and nurture zealously. According to noted academician and literary critic Dr. Nilufer Bharucha Parsi women have not been rigorously subjected to the regime of the Purdah, but they share the limited and reductive world of their Hindu and Muslim sisters in India. Parsi traditions are rooted in the patriarchal society of ancient Iran and these patriarchal moorings have been reinforced by a 1300 years long residence in India. Association with the British during the Raj coated Parsis with a thin patina of westernization and emancipation; but for the majority of Parsi women the fine veil remained from behind which they looked at the world.

Gieve Patel like many Parsi playwrights is also not much happy about the tag of 'Parsi play' or compartmentalizing it under the ethnic Parsi background. He himself strikes back in an interview

I don't think you should label it as a Parsi play, though it is written by a Parsi and filled with Parsi characters... I have no interest in flogging the Parsi angle or anything else... I think I am too much of a Parsi to have to do anything self-conscious such as creating a 'Parsi' character. I write what I am most familiar with, and that's being a Parsi. (Parsiana 75)

Though Patel repudiates the claim, his plays reflect the quintessential Parsi ethos as well as the many of his characters reflect the Parsi ideology.

Cyrus Mistry

Cyrus Mistry started writing career as a student. Initially he began his writing as a playwright and then moved on towards freelance journalism and writing of short stories. He has written two plays, *Doongaji House* and *Legacy of the Rage* which has won him several awards. His first play *Doongaji House*, written in 1978 won the Sultan Padamsee Award. Mistry formed an enormous bitterness because the people who gave him such a big honour never saw to it that the play was staged. It was later staged and published by *Stage Two* in 1991. Since then it has had 25 shows in Bombay, Goa and Bangalore.

Mistry's setting is a typical middle class Parsi society. *Doongaji House* is a dilapidated building full of old Parsis and aging single women. *Doongaji House* itself stands as a metaphor for the Parsi community as a whole which is under threat of extinction. 'The three-storeyed building, of which this is the second floor, itself shows alarming signs of age and degeneration. The walls hung with portraits of family ancestors, are cracked sans feeling.' (117)

The Parsi community is a closed ethnic group. It disallows conversions and inter-caste marriages, as an attempt to preserve its pure Persian lineage. All these circumstances make the religion come close to the threat of extinction.

The language used in the play too is typical Parsi language- often a combination of English and Gujarati. Sometimes it is a direct translation of the Gujarati phrase or a sentence into English.

Hormusji ask his wife 'Am I a child or What?' or when he strikes back at Perin for cross-checking him.

Chaal, shut up! I'll drive you out of the house this minute'! It is also reflected in lines which Piroja utters 'okay talk. I am busy with my kitchen (To Perin). Are you coming or no?-' (123)

Mistry introduces many issues which are of utmost concern to the Parsi community. He throws light on the dwindling status enjoyed by the community in post colonial India as against their power and fame during the British Raj.

During the colonial era, many of the Parsis shared a good rapport with the British who showered them with enormous power as well as position. The British, too had a soft corner for the people of this community because they were quite adept in English as well as they were quite light-skinned than their native counterparts. They handled many of the key administrative positions there by helping the colonizers to carry out the administration efficiently and smoothly. In return for their dedicated services, the Raj showered them with immense wealth and power. Critic Coomi Vevaina observes:

The Raj highlighted their outsider position by creating in the Parsis a "fairer-therefore-better-than-most-Indian" complex thereby alienating them from most of their countrymen. Though many intellectuals resisted it and even joined the independence movements against the British, most Parsis gulped down the untruth and felt pleased with the preferential treatment meted out to them by the empire builders. The post independence years left them feeling confused and bereft. While many emigrated to the white lands, those who remained in India needed to grapple with their loss and "fit in" as best as they could. (Vevaina 338)

Thus in the post-Independence period they suffered a declining status thereby leaving many of them to crave for the good-old-times. Hormusji is reminiscent of the good times when ‘Scotch, cognac, vodka ! whatever you want ask, and you shall have it Today, to get pegs of rotgut from that mad Irani in the bar, I have to fight tooth and nail.’ –(123)

Hormusji’s words reflect not just nostalgia for the old times but also reveal the pain and anguish the Parsi community face when they are ridiculed with terms like ‘Parsi Bawaji’. Same old people who used to be in servitude for years now rebuke them and make fun of them unabashedly. The respect and admiration they coveted during the British Raj are now replaced by scorn and mockery with terms like ‘Parsi Bawaji’. Most of the time they forgot that the independence and luxury which they are enjoying now is also a part of the Parsi sweat and blood of patriotic intellectuals like Phirozshah Mehta and Dadabhai Nowroji who strongly backed the freedom struggle back in India. Most important with the onset of Sena-fundamentalism and Thackeray’s ‘Maharashtra for Maharashtrians’ policy which ejects all the non-natives, they forget that it is the Parsis who have built the city and contributed to its immense economic prosperity by their sheer dedicated and hardwork. All these factors of course leads the Parsis to develop a distaste towards natives and in turn the natives could never accept them into their fold because of their elite and refined ways.

Hormusji says to Piroja when the postman doesn’t deliver a letter.

You don’t understand these people Piroja. They have got completely out of hand. They think it is their Raj now. There was a time when they would bow and scrape to us If a Parsi got on to a bus, they would bow and scrape to us. If a Parsi got on to a bus, they would rush to offer him a seat. Today walking down the street, they make fun of you...

Bawaji aya Parsi bawaji ko dekho” (127)

The Parsis have originated from an entirely different land and also belong to a completely different race. This cultural difference has naturally led the native Indians to look upon them as ‘strangers’ or as the ‘other’. The stereotype of the Bawaji further complicates this ‘strangeness’ and debar all cultural negotiation. It becomes conventionally very difficult to place Parsis and decide exactly their standing. Thus the position of Parsis in Indian society is neither socially peripheral (if we look through a caste or class lens - because Parsis belong to the Aryan race and financially too most of them are sound) nor central. But somehow their position is perennially in-between.

Critic Michael Pickering says:

The stranger is inherently ambivalent. The relations of belonging and unbelonging are unsettled and confused by the figure of the stranger because he or she exists in a continual contact zone between belonging and unbelonging. It’s because of this, that responses to strangers are divided between seeing them, “like us” and “unlike us” (56)

In the present era of cut throat competition and globalization, education and exposure have created a number of geniuses waiting to outgo each other. This calculated creation of the ‘other’ helps in warding off any form of threat. This creation of the ‘other’ actually helps in favouring one’s own kind over the other (whether it is a person

belonging to Maharashtra, Punjab or any other place) Thus stereotypes like the Parsi Bawaji belittles a person by assigning him an inferior status and paves way for the so-called more intellectual and balanced person who probably belongs to the hegemonic group. This type of stereotyping validates discriminatory politics and preferential treatments, in the process eliminating the so called 'other' in the race for power and position. Thus it paves the way for one's own (hegemonic groups) to accumulate maximum benefits at the time of resource allocation.

This type of discontent and ridicule in one's land forces an individual to seek refuge in another. Many Parsis who are highly qualified and extremely good in communication have no dearth of jobs abroad and they easily emigrate and settle in white lands. Their material success and prosperity of the people abroad often tempts others to join them or at least send at least their offsprings abroad. Thus the lingering fascination for the Raj, combined with their declining status in post colonial India as well as the religion-based politics prompts them to emigrate and settle abroad.

In the morning, after reading their son Rusi's letter who is in Canada Hormusji says to his wife 'I will tell you one thing Piroja see this. (Hormusji extends his right palm) Travel to a foreign land is very definitely in my fortune line' – (128)

But the condition faced by Hormusji and Piroja is pathetic. Even though they are evicted from their dilapidated Doongaji house, their so-called prosperous Canada based son hardly bothers to call them or give them refuge in their old age.

The ultimate loneliness, anguish and vulnerability faced by old couple is universal thus making the theme of the play also very universal. Hormusji's words to Avan resonates the above theme 'And one day, you too will be old, and lonely, desperately lonely. Then perhaps you will remember your old father who will no longer be alive... I am just telling you the way it is. It's a law of nature...' (161).

The common yearning for joy, love, dignity and companionship form the core theme of the play.

Several other debatable issues in the Parsi community like inter-caste marriage are raised in this play. The strictness and rigidity regarding marriage is again a theme which is explored in the play. Many-a-times, people opting in for inter-caste marriages are evicted from the Parsi colonies which give accommodation only to members from their community. Hormusji is very scathing towards his son Fali who has married a Goan and his strong disapproval of his Goan daughter-in-law is represented by words like, 'They will throw him and his ayah (Fali's wife) out on the footpath. Why shouldn't they? It's a Parsi colony for dheras like...' – (134) He echoes the same venom and spite for his other son Sohrab's wife too who again doesn't belong to the Parsi fold.

'Sohrab never returned from Bangalore with all the money he had accumulated at my expense, he built a house there, for himself and some bazaar slut he had taken for wife...' -- (124)

To conclude, it can be understood that Parsis have been victims of grave misrepresentations both in reality as well as in literature. The pain and agony of being sidelined from the mainstream on account of their elite consciousness is very much evident from the works of these Parsi playwrights. The unease with their own identity in post colonial India and consequent emigration to the West too has been the focal point of both these writers. And most of the times these representations have been *anti-nation* as

they involved a historical construction of the colonial past. Many Parsi playwrights have been carrying forth this anglicized Parsi stereotype without realizing the fact that the stereotyped too has evolved much over the decades as a result of the changing social circumstances and political environment.

This one-sided representation by both media as well as literature has led to otherisation of the Parsis. Even when a person does not want to be seen in a particular way, he/she might have difficulty in persuading others to change their outlook because stereotyping denies flexibility of thinking amongst people. That is why, even if the Parsis want to shrug away their 'colonial elite' stereotype they are unable to do so because the stereotypes slowly get ingrained in the minds of people making them incapable in seeing beyond the possibilities of a particular representation.

Paradoxically, as against these representations, our historical records have given a number of significant instances where Parsis have rebelled against the British and participated in nationalist causes. Many eminent Parsis have shown tremendous pride in India as their nation as opposed to what has been represented by the above playwrights. The Tatas, who are Parsis, were amongst the pioneers in developing higher technical education in India. The importance of education was one of the factors strongly identified by Jamsetji. In praising the students in one occasion he remarked, with great pride that, Indian students "can not only hold their own against the best rivals in Europe on the latter's ground, but can beat them hollow." (Sen 343)

The Nobel Prize winner Amartya Sen in his book *The Argumentative Indian* remarks of Jamsetji, "That expression of pride-even perhaps of arrogance-is not the pride of a Parsi who happened to be an Indian, but of an Indian who happened to be a Parsi." (356)

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