

The Voices of Ethnicity in Cyrus Mistry's "Doongaji House"

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ABSTRACT

This paper deals with the ethnicity in Cyrus Mistry's "Doongaji House". The whole play is about sensible journey of an old couple. After seeing good past searching for the support from their children but at the same time doesn't want to come out of nostalgia. At the same time children also want pave their own path sometimes even coming out of the boundary of so called limited group. Throughout the play reader shares their journey and becomes anxious about the future of Doongaji House as well the couple. At the end when one part of the building smashes the old is compelled to leave the building. With their exit from Doongaji House play ends with tragic note "Now Doongaji House too, is dead."

Key Words: ethnicity.

It is very much Human nature to find out the favourable conditions for the survival. This tendency leads him towards the migration at apt places. The word migration has turned the world today in Global village. Migration for various reasons has given birth to many new issues related with the identity. One of the major and perplexing phenomenons is "Ethnicity".

As people identify themselves and others in terms of similarity and differences, several issues stand out. Numerous definitions of ethnicity and ethnic group are coined by many scholars. In late 1972, in a report on American immigrants and ethnicity William Bernard has provided this definition:

"Ethnic groups are people who have been brought up together under a particular cultural roof. They share the same ways of doing things, the same beliefs and institutions, the same language and historical background. What they have is not derived from any biological or genetical traits, but comes to them as part of their cultural heritage, formed out of common response to needs in the historical experience of their group." (Hicks and Leis 2)

Wikipedia defines the term Ethnicity, "An ethnic group or ethnicity is a category of people who identify with each other based on common ancestral, social, cultural or national experience. Unlike most other social groups,

ethnicity is primarily an inherited status. Membership of an ethnic group tends to be defined by a shared cultural heritage, ancestry, origin myth, history, homeland, language and/or dialect, symbolic systems such as religion, mythology and ritual, cuisine, dressing style, art, and physical appearance."

It is notable that the words "ethnic", ethnicity" and "ethnic group" may quite different notions to the different people. But most of the definitions on ethnicity stress a common belief that "feeling of continuity with the past" (Hicks and Leis 2). The Indian nationality consists of many ethnic groups and tribes based on their particular similarities like origin, language, religion, state territory, immigration etc. For example, Goan-catholic, Gorkha, Adivasi, Gurjar, Anglo-Indian, Kashmiris, Parsis etc. These groups have contributed in the constitution of India's rich and complex history. Parsi ethnicity possesses a prominent place in Indian ethnic groups. Though they are having 0.006% of the total Indian population, their contribution in Indian history is significant.

As Parsi scholar Pilo Nanavati states in his book "Parsee Praja", Parsi or Parsee is the migrated community to India who are the followers of Zoroaster. The word "Parsi" itself refers to the Persians. They have migrated from their motherland Iran in defence of their religion

Zoroastrian in between 8th to 10th century. To escape from the Muslim invaders they migrated to India. They came to the Gujarat on the western coast of India and asked for the permission to settle. At that time they have promised to assimilate with the Indian people same as sugar melts in milk (38-39). From that time to today the nation has witnessed the glorious saga of Parsi community. They have contributed their best in the fields like industry, national spirit, education, science, charity etc. To name a few Dadabhai Navroji, Pheroze Shah Mehta, Dinshaw Wacha, Jamshedji Tata, Adi Godrej, Homijehangir Bhabha, Sohrabmodi, Ratan Marshah, Adi Marzban. Parsis have mostly settled at coastal Gujarat and Mumbai. With the flow of time they have turned most urbanized community of India. Despite their long residence in India, Parsis have not lost their Zoroastrianism. They are still trying to preserve their ethno-religious Parsi-Irani identity. Numerically this community is at the edge of extinct. There are various burning issues for the community like intercommunity marriages, late marriages, low birth rate and migration to foreign countries.

Parsis have contributed in many ways to the country but their contribution in the field of art especially in theatre is remarkable. It is notable that many scholars have attributed the start of the commercial theatre in India to Parsis. The first drama company named "Parsee Natak Mandali" was established in 1853 and they performed the first drama "Rustom and Sohrab". All playwrights took inspiration from Persian legends and Hindu mythology. Even historical plays were successful because of gorgeous settings and costumes." (Karanjia 13). But the New Theatre or '*NaviRangbhoomi*' has changed the total scenario of Parsi theatre. The stereotyped Parsi theatre has changed its attire. In the late 1970s and 1980s not only Parsi theatre but also other genres of Parsi literature have adopted new themes of current issues and identity. The feeling of alienation and insecurity experienced by this community is majorly reflected in their works of art. Ethnic identity is one of major themes in modern Parsi literature. The writers like Bapsi Sidhwa, Gieve Patel, Rohinton Mistry, Farrukh Dhondy, Dina

Mehta, Zubin Driver, Ninaz Khodiji, Cyrus Mistry etc. are glorifying names of Parsi literature. Many a time these writers write about the complexities of their cultural experiences.

Cyrus Mistry is one of the glorious names of the new waves of Parsi literature. Cyrus Mistry is having multi-dimensional skills as journalist, short-story writer and playwright. He also wrote screenplay and dialogue for Gujarati film *Percy* based on his short story. He wrote two plays "Doongaji House" (1978) and "The Legacy of Rage" (1992), and the novels "The Radiance of Ashes" (2005), and "The Chronicles of a Corpse Bearer" (2013). He has been honoured by various awards like Sultan Padmasee Award for his play "Doongaji House", National Award for Best Gujarati Film, "*Percy*", for story, screenplay and dialogue (1989), Crossword Book Award, shortlist, "*The Radiance of Ashes*" (2005), DSC Prize for South Asian Literature (2014), and recently Sahitya Akademi Award for "*Chronicle of a Corpse Bearer*" (2015). His first play "Doongaji House" won Sultan Padmasee Award in 1978 but performed very lately by Toni Patel of Stage Two in 1990, after 12 years of publication.

The play is set in Bombay in the late 1960s. It is about the story of Pochkhanawalla family who dwells in Doongaji House (Mistry 116). The protagonist Hormusji, his wife Piroja, their children Rushi, Fali and Avan had seen good days in this mansion. Once upon a time Doongaji House was an elegant building in the heart of Bombay. It used to be the tallest building of the surrounding area. Hormusji and his friend Darabshah has been shown lamenting upon the old days. Hormusji is very much keen for his house and almost lives in nostalgic state. He often remembers the golden days of the building. As Hormusji narrates:

"When Bombay first got electricity - 1928, I think - ours was one of the first buildings to install a meter. You know Avan? It was the tallest building around for miles At night it would be glow brightly, like a lighthouse in a sea of dimly-lit fishing boats. At one time it was a matter of pride to be able to say "I live at Doongaji House." " (152)

Here Doongaji House itself stands as the metaphor for the Parsi community. The golden era of the community is represented by the gigantic and prosperous building. But at the same time playwright also describes the present dilapidated condition of Doongaji House where many Parsis stay. The building has now lost its charm and it is almost about to vanish.

“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 ancestors, are cracked and peeling. In one corner of the room, a beam of timber has been erected to support some sagging portion of the ceiling above.” (117)

In a way the decayed condition of the building represents the collapse of the Parsi community also. Just like the glorious state of the building the community also owned glorious history. The prevailing trends of the community like late marriages, low birth rates etc. have reduced the population of the community. Alike Doongaji House the whole Parsi community is also under threat of extinction.

Cyrus Mistry throws light on the oscillating situation of the Parsi community. The dilemma of the community during British Raj and after independence is well narrated in the play. He also narrates about the power, name and fame the community have enjoyed during the British Raj. One of the Parsi researchers Jesse S. Palsetia has very well accounted about the colonial and Parsi relations in her work. As she reports,

“The historical and cultural overview of the Parsis and their relationship with the British offered in Parsi colonial writing, remain useful and important in understanding the contemporary Parsis The British ability to aid and support Parsi identity is significant and complex” (Palsetia 28 -29)

During the British era many Parsis shared good relationship with Britishers. The British too had soft corner for the community due to their lucidity in English and quite lighter skin tone of them than the natives. They even cherish many good administrative positions during the Raj. The situation is well penned by the playwright:

“We had plenty of money. Every evening, coming home from work, I’d pick up something... those éclairs from Monginis? Pineapple cake! Liqueur chocolates!” (126)

One cannot deny the truth that many Parsi freedom fighters like Dadabhai Nowroji, Phirozshah Mehta have contributed their best for the freedom of India but the post independence years created perplexed and confused state for them. The situation has turned worse for them and they gradually became the symbol of laughter and mockery. They lost the respect they once earned in the days Raj. Hormusji again and again passes through the scornfulness and utters as if it is their Raj now. The difference between the ways of treating Parsis is well narrated in this dialogue:

“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. *“Bawajiaya. Parsi bawajikodekho.”*” (127)

The transformation from ‘elite Parsi’ to *‘Parsi bawaji’* is very painful for Hormusji as well for any Parsi. Hormusji’s nostalgia not only speaks about his pain but also becomes the mouthpiece of the journey the whole community has undergone.

Mistry introduces many issues which are very much connected with the Parsi community. At the backdrop of this family drama one can sense the crumple of older family values by the new and young generation. In Pochkhanawalla family Hormusji and Piroja are having three children two sons, Rushi and Fali and a daughter Avan. Their son Rushi has settled abroad and doesn’t care about them. Another son Fali is *mataka* bookies (136). He has been drawn out due to his ill habits of gambling and marriage with another caste lady. Daughter Avan takes the responsibility of parents but later on she also flies away with his cousin Cawas. The big gap between old conventions and new generation is visible at many instances. Hormusji states:

“...But those days are gone, Darabshaa. This is a generation of sissies. The blood has been polluted.” (138)

While on other side Avan says

“Old times, old times. In this house there’s nothing else. Do you remember this? Do you remember that? I’m still young, don’t you see?” (161)

Thus the family drama represents many social issues of the community where young generation is inclined to fly towards abroad to get better opportunities and the pathetic condition of parents who have been pushed to mere loneliness and anguish. This occasion also make the play universal with the theme of ultimate loneliness. As Hormusji utters:

“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.” (161)

The other burning issue of inter-caste marriage is also touched in the play. Parsis do not allow mixed marriages to preserve its pure Persian lineage though their population has reduced very minimal. Hormusji is very angry towards his son Fali who has married a Goan and his strong disapproval is represented thus: “They will throw him and his ayah out of the footpath. Why shouldn’t they? It’s a Parsi colony. Not for *dheras* like-“(134). Parsi elite consciousness does not allow Hormusji and many such Parsis for inter-caste marriage.

The play is set in the backdrop of late 1960s. Historically this year is known for the “SamyuktaMaharashtra Movement”. This movement has demanded for the creation of separate Marathi speaking state. The tension of the time and glimpses of “Maharashtra for Maharashtra” policy is also woven in the threads of the theme.

“Last night two Maharashtra boys were stabbed in fight. Some political thing. They were member of that group - Yuvak Sangh or something. So their gang retaliated. Some shops in Null Bazar were looted. A few windshields smashed. Some Muslim fellows were beaten up at random” (138)

Hormusji also remembers past incident when

“In 1921 when the Prince of Wales came to Bombay, the same thing happened. Parsis vs. Hindus. A few shop looted, few of our women molested... before we knew it, it had spread through the whole city and we were fighting to save our lives” (138)

Both the instances very well depicts the dilemma of small ethnic group at the time of crisis where they just turns minority. Even after the settlement of so many years in India Parsi community is closed ethnic group. The community lives in dwindling state. In race of power and position they turn ‘others’. This state in between ‘attached’ and ‘detached’ causes problems for them. This situation very well penned by the playwright.

The whole play is about sensible journey of an old couple. After seeing good past searching for the support from their children but at the same time doesn’t want to come out of nostalgia. At the same time children also want pave their own path sometimes even coming out of the boundary of so called limited group. Throughout the play reader shares their journey and becomes anxious about the future of Doongaji House as well the couple. At the end when one part of the building smashes the old is compelled to leave the building. With their exit from Doongaji House play ends with tragic note “Now Doongaji House too, is dead.” (181)

In the novel “The Crow Eaters” by Bapsi Sidhwa, the protagonist asks the question: “There are hardly a hundred and twenty thousand Parsis in the world—and still we maintain our identity—Why?” (The Crow Eaters 11). The answer could be their strong belief in religion and customs. The play has included many rituals, customs, cuisine and various ceremonies of Zoroastrian religion. “*uthamana*” (122), “wearing *kashti*” (129), “*sudrah*” (130), “*Dhandar and kolmi no patio*” (136), “*dhandar-sauce*” (143), “*khichri-kuhri*” (143), “*khandhias*” (158), “*Atash*” (159), “*masoor*” (175) etc. are the expressions which gives the play typical Parsi flavour. Even the set instructions create the Parsi home in front of the readers like “Furniture is drab and mostly antique.” (117), “A dearly old cupboard with a large inset mirror”

(117). The linguistic beauty of the play is also note-worthy. Characters use typical Parsi-Gujarati expressions with English at many instances. For example, “*Chaal*, shut up!” (121), “*Saalo loafer*” (122), “*Bas!*”(134), “*Buddha*” (135), “*maidikri*” (144), “*saasu and wahu*” (169).

The play “Doongaji House” moves from one shade of life to another and turns into tragedy. Though rooted in the life of one small family, it becomes mouthpiece to entire ethnic group – Parsi community. It shows the predicament of one family and leads to the entire ethnic group. Thus, in “Doongaji House” Cyrus Mistry tries to reposes history and displays various threads of ethnicity to assert the identity of Parsi community.

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A day without laughter is a day wasted.

~ Charlie Chaplin