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In Pursuit of Happiness: The Parsis Search for an El Dorado

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Abstract

The Parsis are an ancient race following the religion of Zarathushtra. Pride in their ancestral heritage is reflected in the desire to reinvent the past within the framework of the novel so as to identify and capture their cultural traits. And to this end their novels reveal constant references to their culture- their history, the Zoroastrian world-view, food-habits, dress, rituals, attitude towards women, beliefs etc. Religion and history are thus interwoven to establish their ethnic identity.

Having found refuge in India after their persecution by the Muslim hordes in Persia, they seemed to be happy in being allowed to follow their own religion in peace. Yet the post independence era found them migrating in large numbers to western shores, following in the trail of the British.

This paper will explore through select novels of Rohinton Mistry and Thrity Umrigar, the reason for these mass migrations of a people who appear to be unhappy in the land adopted by their ancestors and their quest and pursuit of happiness in migrating to foreign shores.

Key words- Parsis, Migration, happiness, ancestors, foreign, religion.

The Parsis as the word suggest, come from Pars, a province in ancient Persia. They came to India seeking shelter from the marauding Muslim hordes in Persia, and were given shelter in India on promising that they would dress up like the locals, speak their language and not convert the local populace to their religion. They mingled with the locals and lived in peace and harmony since they were allowed to practice their own religion. The coming of the British to India and the need to



develop Bombay gave a chance to these industrious Parsis, who till then had been occupied in pursuing occupations such as carpentry, farming, weaving etc., to form closer ties with the British and become their agents. There was no stopping the Parsi then as he rose in power and stature, owning vast tracts of land in Bombay. They became the ‘brown sahibs’, behaving like the British and looking down on the Hindu majority.

Constant allusions to the past made by Parsi writers in novels written by them testify to the immense pride taken by the community in their history. Snippets of Persian history are woven into the novels informing readers of their glorious past, their rich ancient culture and civilization with their beautiful architecture and opulent palaces. Stories of their brave and noble kings like Cyrus and Darius find pride of place in their narrations. Bapsi Sidhwa, Thrity Umrigar and Boman Desai all narrate the ‘Sugar in milk’ story of the arrival of the Parsis in Sanjan, India.

Making a human connection with the past, Thrity Umrigar in *If Today be Sweet* writes about the arrival of the small band of refugees who had arrived in Sanjan and how the Hindu ruler sent them a glass of milk filled to the brim, to tell them that he couldn’t accommodate them:

But the Zoroastrian head priest was a brilliant man. Removing a small quantity of sugar from their supplies he dissolved a small quantity of sugar in the glass, careful not to spill a drop of milk. This was his famous answer – the answer that became a source of pride and a blueprint for future generations: like sugar in milk, our presence will sweeten the flavor of your life, without displacing you or causing you any trouble. (Umrigar, ITbS 255-256)

The Parsis were thus able to stay in India. The overt emphasis by the novelists to fragmented historical events enables them to recreate the past as a story which allows them to open it to the present. What matters to them is the telling of the story of a painful past, of the story of loss (of Persia) and recovery (of prestige under British rule) and a loss (of status after independence) again. The present paper has tried to analyse why the Parsis, who got shelter in India after they fled from Persia from the marauding Muslim hordes have been leaving the country of their choice, where they were given respect and the right to practice their own religion, to western shores. The paper will study the novels of Rohinton Mistry and Thrity Umrigar who have recorded exclusively the lives of their minority community and brought out the Parsis’ search for a Utopian land.



In pre-colonial India, the Parsis indulged in rural activities like farming, carpentry, weaving etc. But during the British rule the community progressed, enjoying an elitist status under them. With the decolonizing of the country the Parsis suffered a setback and considered themselves destitute and stranded. Differences in religious faith, colour, and language, all contribute to a sense of a widening rift between the Hindu majority and the Parsi minority. Having alienated themselves from the local populace, they had to fend for themselves in a country where they felt marginalized, decentred and socially isolated. The feeling of being alienated from the Hindu majority population, due to cultural and social differences is well documented by both these novelists.

The synchronization and melding with the new culture that a race has a tendency to achieve when it goes to a new culture; we find is missing in the case of the Parsis. This conscious resistance to Indian culture on the part of the Parsis may partly be due to the fact that they wanted to avoid a mongrel culture, but the imitation of the ways of the British may also be due to the fact that the British culture was considered superior. As Tanya M. Luhrmann in *The Good Parsi: The Fate of a Colonial Elite in a Post Colonial Society* writes,

For at least one hundred years Parsis as a community had taken the British as their community ideal. They had encouraged their men to spend hours in “physical culture” and cricket to become as manly as the British; they had devoted significant amounts of time and money to English education; they had worn the hot, uncomfortable British dress – crazy in the Bombay heat – because that was what the British did; they had gone to great lengths to separate themselves by breeding and origin not only from other Indian groups, but from India; they had travelled to London for holidays the way Muslims went to Mecca.... The good Parsi, the esteemed and ideal Parsi, was almost English. (21)

The alienation of the Parsis is reflected in their attitude towards the other communities, who are in the majority, as inferior to their own ‘westernised’ and therefore superior ways. That the Parsis look down upon the Hindu culture and way of life becomes amply clear when Nusswan in *A Fine Balance* tells his sister how fortunate she was to be born a Parsi, for according to him, “Among the unenlightened, widows are thrown away like garbage. If you were a Hindu in the old days you would have had to be a good little sati and leap onto your husband’s funeral pyre, be roasted with him” (Mistry, AFB 52).



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The Hindu caste system and its associated crimes are also disparaged by the Parsis, as they become the “other”. Thrity Umrigar in the *First Darling of the Morning* writes,

Occasionally someone brings up a news item about a particularly heinous attack on the Untouchables or Harijans by an upper class Hindu mob and then they all speak contemptuously about the damn caste system and how backward some of these rural Hindus are, to follow its ancient prejudices. The unspoken text is that we are lucky to be Parsis, lucky to be ‘Bombay born and bred’, and therefore free of the oppressive bigotries of people less civilized than us. (146)

The cultural ‘other’ the Maharashtrian becomes a target for attack by the Parsis. Recalling the riots in Bombay when the bank windows were shattered by the mobs, Dinshawji in *Such a Long Journey* says that the local Hindus scattered like cockroaches at the slightest hint of aggression. Later blaming the Shiv Sena leader Bal Thackeray for the attitude of belligerence in the Maharashtrians, he says, “that bastard Shiv Sena leader who worships Hitler and Mussolini. He and his ‘Maharashtra for Maharashtrians’ nonsense. They won’t stop till they have complete Maratha Raj” (Mistry, SaLJ 73). And it is not only the Hindus that they look down upon. Dinshawji in *Such a Long Journey* and Yezad in *Family Matters* talk disparagingly about the Christian girls and how their own Parsi girls would never behave like ‘those’ Christian girls.

The actual presence of the Parsi ‘brown sahib’ left behind after independence was present only physically –with only a physical existence in India but with their souls in England. Emulating the western culture presupposes its superiority and as a result the assumption of the inferiority of the native culture. Espousing their devotion for western culture has further led to a cultural alienation with the locals.

The Parsi predicament of being trapped between loyalty to the western world and India, of living in the past where they flourished under the British and the present where their declining fortunes have resulted in the feeling of a fall from grace which they are trying to escape, comes out clearly in the novels of Rohinton Mistry and Thrity Umrigar.

The head start which the Parsi community got through good education under the British rule and then consequently getting good jobs was being threatened after independence as the group at Mehernosh’s wedding in **Bombay Time** feel. The present situation where the “paan-chewing’



Maharashtrians were also getting educated was a threat to Parsi supremacy and so the elders feel the need for Parsi boys to pull up their socks. The fear of being left behind, of not being the cream of the crop, of losing their privileged position here comes out in the comments of the entire group who wish to see through the success of Mehernosh, a revival of the prestige and position which they once enjoyed during British rule.

The Post-Colonial period found the westernized, elite Parsi left with a British hang-up, in a city burgeoning with the Hindu majority masses. The community which had helped in the construction of the city of Bombay, owning huge tracts of land, now had to share space with the rural 'other'. The metropolis mushrooming with large scale migrations from the rural areas had hardly any space for the original inhabitants. As Luhrmann explicates, "They were going to become a tiny minority in a world of the Hindu masses whom they had tried so hard to see as Other" (Luhrmann 21).

The prestige and status that the community had garnered for itself had gone with the British. Nor were they the only ones who were educated. The 'Other' the locals soon emerged with degrees from schools and colleges becoming rivals and strong contenders for jobs. The Parsis thus felt the need to migrate to foreign shores in search of better opportunities and prospects.

The rush to America and the western world by the Parsis reflects the uncertainty of the community about its future in India. Writes Niloufer Bharucha "In pre colonial India, although they had not been an elite community, they were a respected minority. In colonial India, of course, they had enjoyed elite status. In post-colonial India their status was downgraded and they felt threatened by the rise of regional powers like Shiv Sena" (Crane and Mohanram 78).

For the migrants the necessity to find and create a perfect world, an 'El Dorado' (*Such a Long Journey*) or a 'Camelot' (*Bombay Time*), or the 'Big Enchilda' (*The First Darling of the Morning*) where the 'lack' that they find in this country can be fulfilled seems to be an earnest desire. The country adopted by their forefathers now seems to have nothing to offer except filth, pollution, long waiting queues at the bus and railway stations. We find Yezad in *Family Matters* placed in this predicament from which there seemed to be no hope of deliverance. In order to escape the 'apeman' existence he had applied for immigration to Canada. He wished for "clean



cities, clean air, plenty of water, trains with seats for everyone, where people stood in line at bus stops and said please, after you, thank you. Not just a land of milk and honey, also the land of deodorant and toiletry” (Mistry, FM 137).

The desire to live in a clean and healthy environment, far away from the uncouthness of the locals was a dream for some, egging them on to try to immigrate to a foreign land, with better prospects of living for them and their families. We find the Parsi expatriates living not only in England but also America, Canada and Australia. The resistance to sharing space with the vulgar masses, the sudden transformation of the city from a beautiful island into the present-day chaotic megapolis with a lack of associated conveniences what Yezad calls, “this dying city, rotting with pollution and garbage and corruption,” (Mistry, FM 283) and Noshir Daruwala describes as a country where there was “so much heat, so much chaos, so much insecurity...” (as quoted in Crane and Mohanram (Desai, AU 17)) all stimulate a longing to break away from the original country of refuge.

The appeal of the western world is not only because of its cleanliness, honesty and availability of plenty of resources like Yezad in Family Matter feels. For many, education was the main motive for migration abroad. Sohrab, (ITBS) Binny (BT) and Jimmy (BT) and Mehernosh (IFTB) are some cases to the point. But the eventual motive for deciding to settle there varied from person to person. What each person desired and discovered, to induce them to inhabit those foreign lands was different though a common factor that is found in all the cases was a fundamental ‘lack’ in the country of first migration. For Sohrab in *If Today be Sweet* the appeal of America lies in the feeling of liberation that he discovers. “Here was a sky-is-the –limit country of towering ambition and large dreams, a fabled country that believed in dreams, that was itself a kind of a dream. And it fit Sohrab like a glove” (Umrigar, ITbS 138).

The difference between India and America felt by Sohrab was not only the lack of freedom in India but also the difference in the mind-set of the people. Whereas in India ambition, competitiveness and aggression were looked down upon, in America these qualities were revered because of which the people prospered. A person could aim as high as possible and no one would criticize the attitude, no one would give the example of Icarus flying too close to the sun and



getting burnt. He realized that in America, on the contrary these were rewarded and even revered. It was Sohrab's competitiveness, ambition and "single-minded pursuit of success" (Umrigar, ITbS 138) in America which was rewarded with what every Indian going to America would aspire; material things like a house in the suburbs, two cars and a number of jobs where he excelled and also a family he loved -a smart wife, and a wonderful son. The disparity between the attitude of the two countries and the free outlook of the Americans appealed to Sohrab and made him realize what a misfit he was in his own country of birth, as were "millions of other... who arrived at America's shores brimming with energy, bursting at the seams with pent-up ambition..." (Umrigar, ITbS 138). What Sohrab considers lacking in India is the encouragement of ambition and aggression. The warnings of 'pride comes before a fall' (Umrigar, ITbS 138) by family and friends did not let the free imagination soar and thus restricted growth and development.

For Yezad the "immigration story had two parts: dream and reality" (Mistry, FM 248). The dream consisted of the possession of material comforts like house, car, computer, CD player and clean air. But reality consisted of something else. The Parsi dilemma of migration can be better understood if we understand the 'lack' that the Parsis felt in this country. We notice that a 'lack' leads to desire, fantasy and fulfillment, in stages. We see Sohrab in *If Today be Sweet* hankering for the things he could not get in India and after he achieves everything – material wealth and prosperity and a very loving family, he comprehends the price that he had to pay to achieve what he had. He had left behind the comfort of home, family, friends and a city he was familiar with. And now that he has achieved what he wanted to, a good job, a beautiful, smart wife and an intelligent son, he wants to fulfill a retroactive lack- the presence of his mother in his life to make his happiness absolute. He feels he could be complete only if he could fill up the lack of mother to complete the family. His past in the form of his mother, his wife and son as his future and as he put it, "I felt whole, like someone had stitched me back up" (Umrigar, ITbS 137).

Tehmina in *If Today be Sweet* wonders why all her son's friends whom she met in America were so bitter about India. The bitterness of the migrants concerned everything pertaining to India, the education system, the corruption, the postal service, the slow moving traffic, the bureaucracy, in fact they were unhappy with everything. It makes Tehmina wonder if that was the



reason they left India. The help rendered by Tehmina and her husband to Percy, Sohrab's childhood friend, gave him an impetus and later in America, she realized, that he seemed transformed, as did all the young people she knew. The American Constitution which mentioned the 'pursuit of happiness' as one of the necessary rights of the people may perhaps be responsible for this transformation in people she realized, since on coming here "most of them gained weight, most of them talked louder and laughed louder, some of them even grew an inch or so in height, improbable as that seemed. But the most important thing was they became happy in America" (Umrigar, ITbS 151).

The change noticed in the people once they migrated, the happiness that seemed so palpable, the self-assurance and self-reliance that they achieved are all pointers to the elimination of the lack in their lives and the realization of their dreams and aspirations.

Tehmina in *If Today be Sweet* wonders if this substitute culture was worth the things which were left behind. "The strong family bonds, the way the neighbours looked out for one another, the busy warm aliveness of the streets, such a contrast to the sad, bleak, solitariness of life here." (Umrigar, ITbS 148)

But the flip side was that she herself felt the freedom which she had not experienced in Bombay where she could not eat an ice cream on the streets and not feel many hungry eyes following her, she was not conscious about her 'female body' in America as she was in India and she did not carry herself in that 'guarded way' she did in India.

Binny in *Bombay Time* went abroad to study and settled there. Her father who visited her in London fell in love with the city and what he loved in the city reflects the 'lack' that he feels in Bombay. He loved the "broad, clean roads, its green parks, even the damp and chilly weather that everyone else detested." (Umrigar, BT 20) This was in direct contrast to Bombay with the "sweat, the grime, the black exhaust fumes ... the bleeping horns, the constant stream of people who darted in front of traffic." (Umrigar, BT 20) His disgust with Bombay is reflected in the satisfaction he feels at getting his daughter out of the city. Unable to leave Bombay which is like a "waiting bomb" he gets vicarious pleasure at the thought of his dear daughter having left this living hell and residing in London.



We notice in these novels that apart from economic reasons and material comforts the protagonists in the novels also crave greater autonomy, freedom and happiness associated with the countries of their relocation. The price that they pay for such transplantation in a new country is heavy and yet they are willing to pay the price of such uprooting since the scales seem to tilt more towards self fulfillment and actualisation of their dreams.

Having imbibed British culture - studying British writers, watching English movies, getting trained in English music and art, in short getting an English education, the Parsis were disconnected with the Indian way of life and culture. The Lake Como puzzle of Jehangir in *Family Matters* becomes a metaphor for the Parsis. Like Jehangir, seeking a haven, a refuge from the real world by escaping into the world of Lake Como, the Parsis sought to retreat from this world of trials and tribulations to an idyllic world. Brought up reading Enid Blyton books they perhaps believed like the kids that “there was a better world somewhere. You could dream of a place where there was lots to eat, where children could have a midnight feast and raid the larder that was always full of sumptuous delicacies.... A place where there were no beggars, no sickness, and no one died of starvation” (Mistry, FM 373).

Just as Gustad in *Such A long Journey* believed the IIT to be the El Dorado and Shangri-La, the Atlantis and Camelot, the Xanadu and Oz, (Mistry, SALJ 67) the Parsis believed the western world to be a land of prosperity and plenty offering freedom and material comforts and success and wealth, dreams that may not be possible to achieve in this country for a long time to come. Quick prosperity could be reached out for in America.

The second migration of Parsis to western shores thus seems to be a need for filling up the lack found in India and a search for a land as prosperous and progressive as the lost land of Persia. Tehmina finally decides to settle in America with her son and his family and as the year comes to an end, she decides that she will wish everyone “a new year filled with hope and dreams and yearning. She would not wish any of them success or prosperity or wealth because the magic was in the dreaming. She knew that now. America had taught her that. How wise, to talk about the *pursuit of happiness* and not of happiness itself” (ITBS 295).



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