



THE CHASE FOR IDENTITY: PARSI TRADITIONS AND AWARENESS IN THE WORKS OF PLAYWRIGHTS GIEVE PATEL

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ABSTRACT: This paper closely looks at the work of Parsi playwright Gieve Patel who open, confessional 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.

KEYWORDS: characteristics, culture, adaptability

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 Geive 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 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)

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CONCLUSION

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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