



PORTRAYAL OF PARSI COMMUNITY IN CYRUS MISTRY'S PLAY 'DOONGAJI HOUSE'

SIDHARTHA SAWANT

Assist. Professor

S.S.V.P.S.'s College Shindkheda.

Dist. Dhule, (MS) **INDIA**

ABSTRACT

Parsi is a religious community which is a group of followers in India of the Iranian prophet Zoroaster. Over the centuries since the first Zoroastrians arrived in India, the Parsis have integrated themselves into Indian society while simultaneously maintaining or developing their own distinct customs and traditions along with their peculiar ethnic identity. Cyrus Mistry's Sultan Padamsee's award-winning play Doongaji House written in 1978 is an epitome of parsi community where the tradition of the old Parsi theatre of colonial India with ethnicity are the key features of this play. Though Doongaji House is a dilapidated building full of old Parsis and aging single women, it emphasizes on the Parsi community with their peculiar cultural ethnicity. Doongaji House itself stands as a metaphor for the Parsi community as a whole which is under threat of extinction.

Key Words: Parsi Community, Ethnicity

Introduction:

Being a distinctive religious community, Parsi in India occupies an important place in this multi religious and multi lingual country and lives most harmoniously. Over the centuries since the first Zoroastrians arrived in India, the Parsis have integrated themselves into Indian society while simultaneously maintaining or developing their own distinct customs and traditions along with their peculiar ethnic identity.

Origin:

Parsi is a religious community which is a group of followers in India of the Iranian prophet Zoroaster. The Parsis, whose name means "Persians", are descended from Persian Zoroastrians who immigrated to India to avoid religious persecution by the Muslims. The invasion of Muslims in the 7th century degraded the position of Zoroastrians to be secondary.



After invasion, Arabs destroyed Iran and set fire to the every written documents of Zoroastrian community which also included Parsi language, literature and culture. Meanwhile a small group of Zoroastrians ran helter and skelter to sustain their community and they took refuge in India. They landed at Sanjan, a place in Gujrat around 900 AD and have been living since then. At Sanjan, King jadhav Rana gave them refuge. Being an alien community, it took time to integrate them in Indian society. Still they are identified with their unique language, behavior and culture.

Cultural Identity of Parsi Community:

The *Qissa-i Sanjan* is a tale of the journey of the Parsis to India from Iran. It says they fled for reasons of religious freedom and they were allowed to settle in India thanks to the goodwill of a local Hindu prince. However, the Parsi community had to abide by three rules: they had to speak the local language, follow local marriage customs, and not carry any weapons. Over the centuries since the first Zoroastrians arrived in India, the Parsis have integrated themselves into Indian society while simultaneously maintaining or developing their own distinct customs and traditions (and thus ethnic identity). This in turn has given the Parsi community a rather peculiar standing: they are Indians in terms of national affiliation, language and history, but not typically Indian in terms of consanguinity or cultural, behavioural and religious practices.

Portrayal of Parsi Life in Indian Cinema:

Parsi life is a distinctive cultural life in India which has been portrayed in Indian Cinema. This portrayal tries to present the picture of parsi community before the world and maintains their existence which is on the verge of extinction of population of this community. There are many Indian cinemas which vividly present Indian Parsi life for example 2006 film *Being Cyrus* is a story about a dysfunctional Parsi family of Panchgani, 1998 Deepa Mehta film *Earth* has a girl who belongs to a Parsi family during the partition of India, 2003 Hindi film *Munnabhai MBBS* having Kurush Deboo as Dr Rustom, *Ferrari Ki Sawaari* has the main character and his father and son are Parsis and *Shirin Farhad Ki Toh Nikal Padi* featuring Boman Irani and Farah Khan, has a plot that takes place in a Parsi community.

Parsi Theatre as portrayal of Parsi Community:

Actually the momentum that Indian English theatre gained during 1850s onwards was not from individual dramatists or directors, but from a collective effort of many theatre companies. Among them, Parsi theatre may be considered a vital part which produced a sizeable number of English plays: Shakespearean and Victorian melodramas in large. Parsi theatre emerged in 1850s and continued to be in subsistence till 1930s. Actually in 1852-53 this famous Parsi theatre has been launched in Bombay and **Postaji Pharnji** was the pioneer

in establishing Parsi Theatre Company. This theatre movement was very crucial for the development of Indian English theatre since it adopted Western theatrical repertoire as means of production of plays. About the Parsi theatre, Anuradha Kapur appropriately observes,

‘An aggregate of European techniques, pageantry, and local forms, enormously successful in the subcontinent and beyond, it may be seen as India’s first modern commercial theatre’ (Kapur; 103).

Started as amateur groups, this theatre institution soon turned professional and as a result many troupes were started. This period also experienced a rapid growth in audience of whom a major chunk belonged to Bombay middle class. Some of the major troupes include Parsi Stage Players, Victoria Theatrical Company, Eliphinstone Dramatic Club, Zoroastrian Theatrical Club, Alfred Theatrical Company, Madan Theatre in Calcutta, etc. The Parsi theatre was not sole property of Parsi community, but people from other communities were also engaged. Some giant names include Dadabhai Patel, Agha Khan Kashmiri, Fida Hussain, Sohrab Modi, Seeta Devi, etc. To quote Kapur again: They may have had many Parsi financiers, managers, performers, and patrons, but the personnel were by no means exclusively Parsi. Cross-cultural and cross-linguistic movement of artists and writers led to a heterogeneous mix at a broadly national level, with the result that Parsi companies not only worked in Gujarati, Urdu, Hindi, and even English, but inspired theatre in virtually every corner of India. Parsi theatre would always be known for creating the Indian stage history because it boasted the largest ticket-buying audience. But the advent of motion pictures and films in 1930s destabilized the base and foundation of Parsi theatre.

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 work of Parsi playwright namely Cyrus Mistry and tries to explore how it has helped him to shape cultural identity in the larger pan-Indian identity. Cyrus Mistry, Ninaz Khodiji, Zubin Driver, Geive Patel and Dina Mehta are the prominent playwrights of Parsi Fraternity who have flourished Indian theatre with typical portrayal of their own cultural life. Here researcher lays emphasis on Cyrus Mistry’s Sultan Padamsee’s award-winning play *Doongaji House* which is written in 1978 and finds out how this play is an epitome of parsi community on account of the presentation of the tradition of old Parsi theatre of colonial India with ethnicity are the key features of this play.

Cyrus Mistry’s *Doongaji House*: Reflection of Parsi Life

Cyrus Mistry started writing career as a student. His first play *Doongaji House*, written in 1978 won the Sultan Padamsee Award which made him popular playwright. 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.' (Mistry; 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? - (Mistry; 123)

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.

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.

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' – ((Mistry; 128)

But the condition faced by Hormusiji 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...' ((Mistry; 161).

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...' – (Mistry; 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...' - ((Mistry; 124).

Summing Up:

Thus Cyrus Mistry's Sultan Padamsee's award-winning play *Doongaji House* written in 1978 is an epitome of parsi community where the tradition of the old Parsi theatre of colonial India with ethnicity are the key features of this play. Though *Doongaji House* is a dilapidated building full of old Parsis and aging single women, it emphasizes on the Parsi community with their peculiar cultural ethnicity. *Doongaji House* itself stands as a metaphor for the Parsi community as a whole which is under threat of extinction.



WORKS CITED

1. Bhatt, Krishna S. *Indian English Drama: A Critical Study*. New Delhi: Sterling, 1987
2. Bharucha, Nilufer. *From a Behind A Fine Veil: A Feminist Reading of Three Parsi Novels*. "Margins of Erasure: Purdah in the Subcontinental novel in English. Ed. Jain
3. Jasbir and Amina Amin. New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 1995.
4. ---. "Why all This Parsiness? An Assertion Of Entho-Religious, 1988 Identity in The Recent novels by the Parsis. *Mapping Cultural Spaces Postcolonial Indian Literature in English* Ed. Nabar Vrinda and Nilufer Bharucha. New Delhi: Vision Books Pvt. Ltd, 1997.
5. Dhawan R.K (Ed). *Fiction of the Nineties*. New Delhi: Prestige Books, 1994.
6. Doctor, Geeta. 'Dr. Patel and Mister Behram' *.Parsiana* .March 1988 (71-75)
7. Driver, Zubin. *Worm Play*. Hyderabad: CIEFL, 2005
8. Khodaiji, Ninaz. *Insomnia*. Hyderabad: CIEFL, 2005
9. Mehta, Dina. *Getting With Murder*. Calcutta: Seagull, 2000
10. Mistry, Cyrus. *Doongaji House*. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2006
11. Talwar, Urmila and Bandana Chakrabarthy (Ed). *Contemporary Indian Drama*. New Delhi: Rawat Publications, 2006