

## PARSI DILEMMA AND DISPLACEMENT: A STUDY OF THE FICTION OF ROHINTON MISTRY AND BAPSI SIDHWA

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I miss the high sky.  
I miss the fires burning.  
O, sweet autumn,  
Take me home in your wind.

-Michael Finch's Finding Home

Parsi one of the wealthiest communities of India is now seems to be on the verge of extinction, this alarms not only the community within but also to the society to study the causes and the problems behind. This crisis of the community becomes the burning issue of the 21<sup>st</sup> century for the social scientists as well as to the writers and the artists of the community. The Parsis are surprisingly down to the critical near about 138,000 and diminishing with each passing days or months, around 70,000 live in India. Most of the Parsi population is concentrated in Mumbai alone and its neighborhoods. It seems more disturbing as a figure when we compare it with the demography of 1901 where 93,000 were located in India alone. Like the vultures, one of the essential part of Parsis' last rites, Parsis are also disappearing from the horizon; together with the decline of the vultures which might take 30-40 years to the complete extinction, the Parsi are also facing their own decline.

This all crisis caused the dilemma of existence and displacement from their homeland goes back to the 10<sup>th</sup> century BCE when the decline of the Sassanian Empire took place in Persia (now Iran) which provided the opportunity to Islamic invaders not only to occupy the country but also to convert it into a brand new Islamic state; in that process these invaders compelled the Zoroastrians to convert to Islam or die. Thus the Zoroastrians originally forced into exile by Muslim invaders from their native Persia, the community came to India for their safety and settled as diaspora of Persia, and got the new identity with the term Parsi because being from the land of Persia. Thus, Parsis are the one of the earliest diaspora community, even though they got a refuge in India yet they are very eager to migrate or immigrate to other counties to fill the vacuum and longing for homeland in some to other. Rohinton Mistry and Bapsi Sidhwa are no exception to this longing, Mistry migrated to Canada from India and Sidhwa migrated to the USA from Pakistan; their migration from their native and countries caused them the pain of

double displacement. Sometimes this double displacement comes as a rootless cosmopolitan and their longing for their native suggested a search of belonging, this might be a reason which gave their fiction an impression of autobiographical narrations. As Sidhwa finds herself a Punjabi-Pakistani-Parsee English writer who is narrating her own encounters with life and situations, in an interview to Bachi Karkaria Sidhwa says, “I’m a Parsi first, then a Pakistani, specifically a Punjabi. I’m woman simply by gender. I don’t feel American at all. My consolidated 3 P identity has enriched my writing.” (Karkaria 4) And as Mistry himself gives an impression about his native in his fiction as a land of his happy memories and his family place, which make him feels like Tiresias who is throbbing between Bombay and Canada; later Mistry describes, “I think emigration is an enormous mistake. The biggest any one can make in their life. The loss of home leaves a hole that never fills.” (FM 254)

This dilemma of finding the real root and quenching the longing of homeland is very dominant in Parsis; and the real problem with their status is due to their self-criticism as a cultural construction about something other than flash-and-blood Parsis. As Tanya M Luhrmann describes in her *Good Parsi*:

The Parsis’ predicament is the dilemma of all those gamble on history’s outcomes and lose, and find themselves in a different, often inverted, symbolic position from one they had chosen. (Luhrmann, 16-17)

Parsis seem to have some sort of complex that put their community closer to the British than Indian; they tried their hard to imitate the colonizers. Sidhwa put that very clearly when she says, “Look, we’re Parsee, everybody knows we dress differently.” (AAB 10) later she describes Parsis’ fascination towards the English, “If we must pack off, let’s go to London at least. We are the English king’s subjects aren’t we? So we are English!” (ICM 40) Luhrmann also feels the same strings of consciousness in Parsi minds and she explained the crisis this mindset caused to the Parsi community:

Parsis chose to be like the British and so adopted the common British understanding of the Indian world. They did not anticipate that when they lost the British, they would condemn themselves for being themselves the pathetic natives they had learned to see and despise with British eyes. They live now with an identification which had emotionally gripping and, once lost, has plung them into the emotional despondency of moral failure. (Luhrmann, 17)

This choice of being more English than Indian made this Parsis’ dilemma more complex than ever before. Their imitation and longing to be same as the British put them into the crisis of being absurd identity. After independence and chaotic partition of India and Pakistan made their existence burdensome because of the symbols they put over into the process of being more English. Sidhwa put her emphasis on this when she describes the condition, “I tell you we are betrayed by our own kind, by our own blood! The fools will break up the country. The Hindus will have one part, Muslims the other. Sikhs, Bengalis, Tamils and God knows who else will have their share; and they won’t want you!” (TCE 283) The same pain expressed by the Luhrmann:

They are struggling with the burden of colonial symbolism which held that those identified with the mass of natives were emasculated. And while their dilemma –being a tiny community, neither Hindu nor Muslim –is

idiosyncratic, it is only a variant of the more general problem of the colonial encounter: the asymmetrical power relationship in which the elite in particular try and fail, to cross the barrier that divides the colonizers from the colonized. ( Luhrmann, 17)

Another problem with their society is that they never feel at ease with the natives of the country, and then a time came when Hindu-Muslim politics became more dominant and decisive, that made them very clear that their small minority circle had no place in decisive politics of the nation. This sense of no importance play a major role to make this community more self-centered and self-denigrating in nature as well as in their way of living which can easily perceived in their literature – self-centered narratives of Parsis are the good example of this condition and Rohinton Mistry and Bapsi Sidhwa are no exception to that as well. Luhrmann pointed it out how the Parsis are losing the directions and dignity once they were known for:

There is a sense in this discourse that the community has lost direction, lost steam, that young men can no longer function effectively and in any event no longer care, that the community is dying and decrepit and has long since passed its zenith. Parsis say that the community no longer has moral integrity, that Parsis will lie and steal. (Luhrmann 127)

Mistry himself feeling sad about the decline in the integrity of the community, he remembered the Nagarwala case that becomes a national issue for discussion in 1980s; it was hard to believe not only for the Parsis but also for the fellow countryman that a Parsi can ever commit a crime or forgery. But he realizes the later impact of political nexus when he describes about the mounting of corruption in India, “Corruption is in the air we breathe. The nation specializes in turning honest people into crooks” (FM 31), though it seems very hard to be remain intact from the impact but Mistry has a firm faith in Parsi values which always make him remember that, “you cannot rob you of your decency. Not if you want to keep it. You alone can do that, by your actions.” (FM 234)

Another issue that alarming their community which caused a graver concern for them- It is a community which is perceived as affluent, influential, and industrious, But the Parsis as a community, are fighting a battle with dwindling numbers and orthodox, insular mindsets; many within the community are questioning the very approach and the discrimination against Parsi women with non-Parsi spouses. The haunting problem of late marriage or the tendencies of remain bachelor or spinster is increasing day by day, and their highly educated community with free thinking are promoting the clan to involve into out-side or mix-marriage but their religious ideology is not so flexible to adapt the change as Luhrmann describes:

“History testifies that mixed marriages was one of the main causes for the fall of once mighty Sassanian empire. Do we want history repeat itself? And religious purity cannot be maintained by the offending outsiders. As a high priest explained, “ A woman marrying outside the community cannot observe the rule of purity as laid down by the Zoroastrian religion. She cannot perform ritual ablutions [*padyab kustī*] and do prayers [*farziyat* and *bandaj*] in a non-Zoroastrian environment. When she bears children of a non-Zoroastrian seed [*tokham*] and participates in Zoroastrian ceremonies, this woman does great damage to the Zoroastrian religion.” Such women, he implies, physically defile the Parsi community. (Luhrmann 161)

Sidhwa also discusses this issue of mix-marriage in her *An American Brat* when she describes about Zareen realization of her mistake of sending her daughter to the United States when her daughter take the decision to marry a non-Parsee that shocked her. Ultimately, the mother convinced her daughter that the racial difference in marriage did matter a lot. She told Feroza about the consequences of such marriages by giving examples of some Parsee girls who married non-Parsee boys. She told how those girls had to suffer for the remaining parts of their lives and was not allowed to enter alive or dead for the last rites in Dakhma-Nashini (AAB, 214). Same thing is expressed in Mistry's *Family Matters* where the protagonist Nariman's nostalgia came into the horizon, he remembered -How he fall in love with Lucy and the afterward controversy with his parents; he put all this on his running canvas of memory, when make his effort to convince his parents to accept his love to Lucy, " his father said she might be a wonderful person, as gracious and charming as the Queen of England, but she was still unsuitable for his son because she was not a Zoroastrian, case closed." (FM132)

Rohinton Mistry and Bapsi Sidhwa, both writes about Parsi dilemmas and double displacement with their own experience with the world in a particular way through their cosmopolitan discourse; their impact on cultural and social formation can be limited due to their about to extinct community but in some particular subaltern subject this documentation of their community widen their vision, as Mistry claims if Parsi vanished from earth, "it will be a loss to the whole world. When a culture vanishes, humanity is the loser"(FM 415). Though presently scattered and settled in small pockets across the world, Parsis are the people without a state; their numbers are small only if you think in terms of national figures, but most of them count their community in relation to the extended diaspora — in Canada, the United Kingdom, the United States and Australia with their settlement in India and Pakistan. But all in all I could say the road of reconstruction of faith in idea of homeland and sense of survival are seem too long for this diminishing community living in dilemma and displacement, the lines from the poem *Dilemma* of David Ignatow are aptly expressing the Parsi longing and displacement:

whatever we do; save by dying,  
and there too we are caught,  
by being planted too close to our parents.

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**Abbreviations:**

SLJ Such a Long Journey  
AFB A Fine Balance  
FM Family Matters  
ICM Ice- Candy Man  
CE The Crow Eaters  
AAB An American Brat