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A Chronicle of the Lost World: Exploring Cultural Identity in Contemporary Parsi Fiction

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Abstract— *The realm of Parsi literature in English is replete with the vibrant and enchanting accounts of the socio-cultural set up of the dwindling Parsi community. Parsis are small ethnic group in India who follow the monotheistic religion of Zoroastrianism. The portrayal of the dynamic and the unique cultural world of the minority Parsi community lends a memorable charm to the distinct fictive world of contemporary Indian and South Asian Parsi writers. The Parsi novelists open a window for the world to have a rare peep inside the myriad cultural complexities of Parsi life. An array of Parsi novelists in recent times have unveiled their cultural identity through the presentations of Parsi milieu in their works. Rohinton Mistry, Bapsi Sidhwa, Dina Mehta, Firdaus Kanga, Boman Desai, Ardashir Vakil, Farrukh Dhondy have painted the canvas of their novels with the rich details of Parsi social, cultural and religious life. The present paper traces the works of eminent Parsi writers and attempts to bring to light their earnest efforts to preserve their cultural identity in the pages of their books.*

Keywords— ***Ethnic, Monotheistic, Zoroastrianism, Myriad, Cultural Identity.***

Parsi literature occupies an important position in the development of Indian English literature because it introduces the distinctive Parsi ethos and celebrates the cultural quest of a minority community negotiating its relationship with Indian society, colonial history, modernity, and cultural identity.

Parsi writers have contributed to English literature through fiction, poetry, drama, autobiography, and essays. Their works sparkle with detailed descriptions of bi-cultural pulls and the dichotomy between tradition and modernity, community and individuality, cultural preservation and assimilation. To appreciate the true spirit of the Parsi fiction, it is essential to understand the historical, religious and socio-cultural patterns of the Parsi community in India. Parsis are small ethnic group in India who follow the monotheistic religion of Zoroastrianism. Parsis are the descendants of the followers of the Persian Prophet Zarusthra estimated to have lived between 1500 to 600 B.C. Zoroastrianism asserts that Ahura Mazda is the one God. Parsi religion is based primarily on the teachings of the sage Zarusthra and advocates a three-fold path of good thoughts, good words and good deeds. Parsis migrated from Persia to Div in India and later settled in Sanjan on Gujrat coast in India roughly around the year 800 A.D. They were forced to flee from their homeland in Persia mainly to avoid religious persecution by the conquering Arab Muslim rulers. While the small Zoroastrian communities are scattered throughout Central Asia, Bombay's Parsi community is the largest practicing group of the Zoroastrians in the world today. Parsis communities are also found in Karachi (Pakistan) and Bangaluru in South India. The population of the Parsi community has severely declined due to their strict religious faith in the purity of blood and because their religion allows no conversion from any other religion. During India's colonized period, Parsis were greatly favoured by the British rulers but after the partition of India in 1947, the political conditions changed which provoked many Parsis to migrate to England and

America. Rashna B. Singh explains the need for Parsi Anglicization and argues, "the Anglicization of the Parsis can be seen not as uncomplicated mimicry but as negotiation and space in terms of historical and geographical contingency of national and cultural identity (29).

Parsi literature is important not only because it preserves the cultural history of a particular community but also because it examines broader questions of identity, belonging, power, and social transformation. Parsi writers have greatly enriched the ethos of the Indian English literature through the vibrant and authentic accounts of Parsi social milieu in their creative writings. They explore the traditional world of Parsi customs, traditions, religious and social practices and preserve it in their writings with an aim to chronicle the fast-disappearing Parsi culture and identity for the future generations. Cultural legacy of Parsis forms the integral part of their literary output as they are not simply concerned about preserving traditions but also about negotiating change, belonging, difference, and the possibility of cultural continuity.

Rohinton Mistry is one of the most powerful voices expressing the nuances of the Parsi cultural identity in all his creative writings. His novels explore the community's existence against the larger backdrop of Indian National politics and socio-economic changes. Rohinton Mistry's novels are a testimony of Parsi history. His works reflect the socio-cultural fabric of the dwindling Parsi community and preserves it in the pages of his novels. His novels open the new world of Parsi customs from birth to death before the readers. In all his novels, the protagonists belong to Parsi community and through them Mistry explores the relationships at the heart of the community. His novels, *Such A Long Journey***,** *A Fine Balance* and *Family Matter* bring to life the lesser-known world of Parsi culture. He portrays the rich and varied cultural life of Parsis ranging from religious prayers to modern issues, controversies, and problems faced by the community in each of his work. The religious beliefs of the Parsis are discussed in detail in all the three novels of Rohinton Mistry. The Fire Temples, Kusti prayers, Towers of Silence, Navjote ceremony, wedding ceremonies, birthday celebrations of Parsis, reasons for the decline in the number of Parsis in India, controversies related with the mode of the disposal of the dead, and inter-religious marriage appear and re-appear again and again in his novels. The opening lines of his very first novel *Such a Long Journey* suggest his interest in the presentation of Parsi culture. He writes, *"The first light of morning barely illumined the sky as Gustad Noble faced eastward to offer his orisons to Ahura Mazda"*(1*).* The very beginning of the novel, prepares the reader to explore the unknown and unexplored world of Parsi heritage. Rohinton Mistry through his novel *Family Matters,* takes the reader on a journey to the inner sanctum of Fire Temple where only Parsis are allowed to enter. Mistry writes about the sign hanging outside the Wadiaji Fire Temple in Bombay which said, "Admittance to Parsis only"(338). His novels give a rare peep inside the sacred precincts of the Fire Temples and render valuable information about the Parsee religious practices. The celebrations of New Year and the Parsi festivals of Navroze and Khordad Sal also form a part of Mistry's narrative. The funeral ceremonies of the Parsees and Tower of Silence are an integral part of Mistry's fictive world. In all the three novels he has presented an engrossing picture of the last rites of the Parsees. The novels of Rohinton Mistry are a well-balanced account of the past, present and future life of Parsi community. Rohinton Mistry has not only showcased the uniqueness of Parsi culture for the rest of the world but also enlightened the world about the dangers faced by their ancient culture in the wake of modern day advancements. Nilufer E. Bharucha identifies the "the detailing of Parsi identity" (Bharucha 59). as a significant feature of Mistry's literary discourse.

Bapsi Sidhwa has emerged as a leading woman Parsi novelist from Pakistan. Her novels are centred around the characters hailing from the Parsi community. Her novels explore the social reality of partition violence, patriarchy, migration, and cultural displacement through a Parsi feminist lens. Sidhwa is known for her depiction of Parsi consciousness in all her major novels namely *The Crow Eaters*, *The Pakistani Bride*, *Ice Candy-Man (Cracking India),* and *An American Brat* to highlight the recurring issues and ideological concerns of her community. Sidhwa's depiction of Parsi life serves as both cultural documentation and subtle social critique, revealing the tensions between preservation and assimilation (Journal of International Women's Studies, vol.22, no.3). The novel, *The Crow Eaters* focusses on the lives of Faredoon Jungewalla, a poor Parsi young man from central India who becomes a famous and rich businessman of Lahore. His family life is constantly disturbed by his assertive, dominating and troublesome mother-in -law, Jerbanoo. The novel describes the social mobility of the Parsi family during the British rule in the early twentieth century. The novel is remarkable for the vivid descriptions of fire worship and strict adherence to the idea of purity of blood, domestic life, weddings, family functions, social expectations beautifully woven in the plot of the novel. The rigid customs and traditions of the Parsi community are presented with a gentle stroke of humour and satire. The portrayal of the funeral rites in the Towers of Silence reveals the firm faith of the older Parsi community, "Our customs are sacred," (*The Crow Eaters* 150). The novel also highlights the skeptical attitude of the

younger generation, "Sacred, but impractical in the city!" (*The Crow Eaters* 151).

In her another novel, *Ice Candy Man,* Sidhwa presents the ambivalence of Parsi community towards the freedom struggle. The novel unfolds the traumatic events that occurred during the times of Partition of India in 1947. The child narrator Lenny presents the Parsi point of view on religious identity which seeks survival in the divided world. The neutral stance of the Parsis in times of crisis exhibits their desire to protect their community and to preserve their identity. Lenny's discussion about the funeral practices highlights the distinctiveness of their religious practices. Lenny's curiosity emphasizes their desire to uphold unique cultural identity as well as the need to negotiate with the modern social life. Sidhwa deftly handles innocent perspective of Lenny with the sharp contrast of the adult world of division and hatred. In the novel, *An American Brat,* Sidhwa presents the issues of interfaith marriages in the Parsi community. Feroza Ginwalla rebels against the family and migrates to Colorado to seek good future. Her roommate Joe helps her to adapt her to the American way of life. She decides to be independent and intends to marry David Press, an American Jew. This announcement brings havoc in her family as no one had ever married outside the Parsi community. Sidhwa has presented a balanced view of Parsi community as they have tolerance for religious and cultural values of other communities.

Firdaus Kanga is yet another Parsi writer from India whose semi- autobiographical novel, *Trying to Grow* effectively blends the issues of disability and identity. He presents a vivid account of the Parsi social life and critically observes the social attitudes towards disability. His other novel, *Heaven on Wheels* brings to life the vibrant Parsi family culture. Boman Desai's *The Memory of Elephants* explores the collective memory of Parsi identity. The novel presents a well observed comment on the themes of generation gap and preservation of Parsi culture and identity. The novels, *Beach Boy* and *One Day* by Indian Parsi novelist, Ardashir Vakil explore the experiences of young generation striving hard to come to terms with Parsi identity and social expectations. Cyrus Mistry is an important contemporary Parsi novelist who explores the social and cultural setup of the community and raises issues of existence and identity through his major works, *Passage of a Generation* and *Chronicle of a Corpse Bearer*. Farrukh Dhondy tackles the themes of preservation of Parsi cultural identity in the light of social and political instability, migration, cultural hybridity, multicultural clash in his novels like *Poona Company* and *Bombay Duck.* The novels of Dina Mehta are important for adding the feminist perspective. Her novel, *And Some Take the Lover* explores the experience of young woman caught between the desire for individual freedom and patriarchal setup.

Thus, Parsi fiction is deeply rooted in its own cultural past. The novelists share a deep bond with their native land, culture, traditions and identity. Their works reveal their genuine concern for the deteriorating social and political conditions and they try to recreate it in their creative writings. Parsi fiction reflects the true love and concern of the Parsis for the culture that gave them an identity of their own. The novelists have painted the social and political and cultural dynamics in their novels with compassionate strokes to preserve it for the future generations. They have focussed on the smallest of cultural detail as it plays a vital role in preserving a vanishing civilization. The Parsi life and culture are portrayed with complete honesty in the works of contemporary writers to ensure its long life. They deal with the reality of Parsi lifestyle without making any attempt of glorify it. In the fictive world of these novelists every detail, as ordinary as the family tensions, limitations, responsibilities and obligations are explored to the fullest. The domestic interactions are tenderly observed and human eccentricities are carefully recorded to provide some of the most unforgettable narratives in literature. The works of Parsi novelists are not just a piece of fiction but the annals of a great heritage which lends meaning to the entire existence of mankind. Their vision transforms everything ordinary and mundane into extraordinary and sublime and make theses novels a great saga of human struggle and triumph whose memories linger long in the hearts of the reader.

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