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Portrayal of Immigration and Parsi Writers in Indian Writing in English – A Study

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Abstract: The word Immigration refers to the process of shifting to a new or unknown country to stay and live. There might be an unaccountable reason behind the migration, such as to escape from religious persecution or a violent conflict, to have employment opportunities abroad, and to acquire higher education. However, it is important to understand that no people in any country or region want to immigrate wholeheartedly. There must be a pain behind the immigration or the lack of opportunities in their native land. Assimilating in a new country is not an easy task, as it involves leaving one's distinct customs, culture, and traditions. The paper focuses on the immigration of Parsis to Indian soil and the contribution of Parsis in the national Freedom Movement and Indian English Literature in particular.

Keywords: Immigration; assimilation; ethnic-heritage; culture and custom

Introduction

It is because of poverty that people move from one place to another temporarily or permanently. Migration is the movement of people, and it is linked with global issues, including economic growth, poverty, and religious persecution. Mrs. Priyambda Singh in her research paper states that “such people might be physically away from their motherland. The impact and the influence of age, psyche, cultural heritage, and political ups and downs on the author's mind is due to the fact”. Assimilation is the process whereby an ethnic heritage is absorbed into the dominant culture of the society. In a country like India, it has been such a long journey for Parsis to take asylum in the Indian soil. Absorbing a new identity is a challenging task for an ethnic community like

the Parsis. India is a country of multiculturalism where one could see people of different races, languages, religions, classes, and genders. It is unthinkable to understand how the ethnic Parsis would have been absorbed into the dominating multicultural Indian society. It is only the Parsis who are known for their magnanimity and are kind-hearted. They were loyal to the country where they settled as Zoroastrian Parsis in the new land of India.

It is important to understand the way Parsis settled in the dominating multicultural Indian society. The Parsis are the Zoroastrians. The term 'parsi' is not a religion or a community; rather, it is a name addressed by the Indians as they were from the Persian land, now Iran. The ancient Persians were the natives of the Southeastern portion of the Iranian Plateau, and they had several tribes such as the Pasargadae, Maraphii, and Maspii. Other tribes were also there, but they were only dependent on one of these major tribes. The nomadic Persians created the Achaemenid Empire. They were called Iranians who arrived in what is today Iran around 1000 BC. It is modern-day Iran, which is among the oldest inhabited regions, such as Damascus, Aleppo, Byblos, Argos, Athens, Sidon, Plovdiv, and Varanasi, in the world. The Persian Empire is one of the greatest empires of the world, comparable to the Roman Empire of the ancient world.

It is also known as the Achaemenid Empire. The reign of the ruler could be calculated approximately between 559 BCE and 331 BCE. It encompassed modern-day Iran, Egypt, Turkey, and some parts of Afghanistan and Pakistan. It was Cyrus II under his leadership that the Persian Empire emerged, and he conquered the Median Empire, which his grandfather had ruled. After conquering the land, he was called the 'shah' or the 'king' of Persia. Emperor Cyrus was not a ruler; instead, he showed love and mercy toward the lands and kingdoms he conquered. He also practiced religious and cultural tolerance toward the people whom he conquered. Then there came Darius, the relative of Cyrus, who set up a system of provinces and governors. The public works were made in his reign. It was under the rule of Xerxes, the son of Darius, who lost his ancestor's glorious reign to Alexander the Great in 334 B.C.E. This was mainly due to Xerxes' irresponsible and unsuccessful campaign to invade Greece.

Zarathustra was a priest, and he founded the first monotheistic religion of the world, Zoroastrianism. He was addressed as a prophet who was also called a messenger of god and His commandments. It is also believed that he was the first one to reveal religion in the world. Consequently, there came other priest-turned prophets like Him. It was Moses for the Jews, Gautama Buddha for Buddhists, Vardhaman Mahavira for the Jains, Jesus Christ for the Christians, Mohammad for the Muslims, and Guru Nanak for the Sikhs. The birth of these prophets is the result of God's plan. Thus, the birth of Zarathushtra is a divine plan of Ahura Mazda. Zarathushtra is a word derived from Avastan, an Indo-Iranian language, which has two meanings: 'Possessing a wise camel' and 'A golden Star'. The two great religious teachers of the Persian Land, called King Jamshed and Faridun, predicted the prophet's arrival on Earth.

No definite record is found about his birth. However, it has been estimated to have occurred between the years 2000 BCE and 6000 BCE. The full name of the holy

prophet is Zarathushtra Spitama. 'Whitest or Purest' is the meaning of the name Spitama, which is also the name of the ninth ancestor of the Prophet. Gayomard, a king of the Peshdadian Dynasty, preached to the people of the dynasty to have faith in one God, Mazda. The system of this faith is also called the 'Mazdayasni' system. This religious belief system was highly encouraged and practiced by the great rulers of the Peshdadian dynasty, such as Hoshang, Jamshed, and Faridun. The people lived happily until the Kayanian Dynasty.

During this dynasty, the evil power of Daevayasnis was predominant. The cruelty inflicted by Daevayasnis was unbearable for Mother Earth's Geush Urvan. She cried to the Almighty, who, after discussion with Bahman and Ardibahesht, Ahura Mazda sent Zarathushtra to the Earth. According to various books and articles, Zarathushtra had a vision of Ahura Mazda in his thirties, when he was in meditation for months, and that made him aid the poor and needy to overcome their problems in life. The Supreme lord of the universe, Ahura Mazda, fulfilled the divine mission by sending Zarathushtra as His medium. He was a man of God-intoxicated who wrote Gathas, seventeen Avestan Hymns traditionally believed to have been composed, and these verses are arranged in five different modes. It is written in the Avestan Language. The language was spoken during Iran's Sasanian Era (226-651CE). His followers called Him Zarathustra, possessor of yellow or old camels. It was also believed in the case of the prophet's birth that his birth made nature rejoice, and all natural elements like trees, flowers, and rivers were overjoyed. At the same time, his birth made the demons tremble and frightened them. Fairies and archangels came there to adore the laughing newborn baby. A miracle happened in His birth. Attempts were made to kill the child by both the evil spirits and the king Turanian of Durasrobo. Like every messenger of God, he was saved miraculously in all their attempts.

Zarathushtra wanted to know the miseries of life. He had a deep longing for justice: why was there death and suffering in the world? What was the origin of evil? Zarathushtra left home when he was twenty, and he wandered like a cloud from land to land. He led a righteous survival. Controlling all his senses, he roamed the forests, caves, and mountains. For ten years, he had been doing calm meditation all the time. Once he received enlightenment from the vision of the supreme lord of the universe, Ahura Mazda, on the mountain of Sabatam. He conversed with the Supreme God and received His wisdom. In direct conversation with God, he also received seven revelations. At the age of thirty, he was a full-fledged, renowned messenger of God Ahura Mazda. He obeyed and preached the commands of God. His preaching was affected by the Satan of zoroastrianism, Ahriman, who wanted to kill the God's messenger. Fortunately, he overcame all his miseries with his spiritual power. Then he became the master even of the demons. The several archangels, the divine messengers of the Lord, conversed with the prophet. They are: Vohumanah – archangel of good thought; Asha Vahishta- the archangel of righteousness, commanded to protect the sacred fire; Khehathra Vairya- the archangel of good loyalty, commended to take care of the metals; Spenta Armaith archangel of modesty, who presides over the Lord of the Earth; Hauravat- the archangel of health, and Ameretat- the archangel of immortality, who presides over the plants. Three times he attained the celestial vision of God, and

he had a perfect knowledge of the whole universe. The sacred book Zend Avesta is like the Bible and the Gita of the Zoroastrians. The scholar R.C. Zaehner writes: ‘Zoroastrianism is the religion of free will par excellence’.

The Chandogya Upanishad, a story of a father who teaches his son the ‘ultimate truth of Hinduism’, shares similarities with the experiences of Zoroaster. The similarities between these two teachings are more or less common in their universal messages. Zoroaster travelled to many countries, including China and India, and he was not welcomed or appreciated by the people of the world. No one attempted to convert to Zoroastrianism—Maidhyoi- Madnha, the cousin of the prophet, who first converted to the religion. The two chief demon-worshippers, Kavis and Karpans, acted against the prophet and poisoned the ears of the Sovereign of Iran, Vishtasp, to kill the prophet, as he was a sorcerer. Believing the false accusation of the priests, the king also sentenced the prophet to die of starvation. When he was in prison, the favourite black horse of the king fell ill. He sent a message to the king that he would cure the horse if the king agreed to the four conditions of the prisoner Zoroaster. The four conditions are fulfilled. The king and the queen were ready to accept the new religion, and they were convinced of the supernatural power of the prophet and started to worship Zoroaster as the prophet of Iran. It was not an exception to the Iranian Kingdom when the ruler of the kingdom practiced a new religion, the people also obeyed and worshiped Zoroastrianism. The new faith and beliefs spread far and wide. Zoroaster was pious and compassionate. Zoroaster’s central ethical teachings are: ‘love the righteous. Have compassion for the distressed.

Assimilating into the Persian land proved extremely difficult for Zoroastrians. The Zoroastrian faith prevailed over the Persian land until the 8th century. It was the period of the Arabian conquest. Right from the mid-seventh century, Muslim Arabs began to conquer the North of central Asia and the West across African lands. Muhammad, an Islamic Prophet, initiated the conquests. The Muslim conquest of Persia is also known as the Arab conquest of Iran. The Sasanian Empire came to an end, and it led to the eventual decline of the Zoroastrian religion. The invading Arab conquests forced the Zoroastrians to convert to Muslims. The age-old Zoroastrians were not ready to accept the new religion. However, the Zoroastrians were free to worship Ahura Mazda without any obstruction. However, in the second half of the seventh and first half of the eighth century, the ‘Umayyad Caliphs’ introduced a ban on non-muslims who were all surviving in the Persian land. Thus, the Arab soldiers quashed the Iranian insurgencies. They burnt the Zoroastrian scriptures, and the Zoroastrian priests were executed. Thus, Islamic became the dominant religion in the Persian land by the late Middle Ages. The native Zoroastrians were fleeing persecution that led many Zoroastrians to leave Persia altogether. In their land, the native Zoroastrians were forced to make decisions that posed a dilemma. They had only two options: whether to adopt the new religion or be ready to die. The Parsis were known for their intelligence, so they made a proper decision. The orthodox Zoroastrians could leave the captivated land, and immediately they were in search of such a land where they could survive with their basic needs. Thus, a large number of Zoroastrians emigrated to nearby India. The shipwrecked migrants landed in Diu, Gujarat, carrying nothing but a Zoroastrian faith

in their hearts and a holy flame from their Fire Temple that they had left behind. Thus was their entry into Indian soil.

India is a country with the power of assimilation of all irrespective of race, religion, creed, etc. Referring to India's plurality, Salman Rushdie remarks: 'The idea of India is based on multiplicity. Plurality and tolerance.... There can be no one way-religious, cultural, and linguistic-of being an Indian; let difference reign' P-14. In India, the Persian Zoroastrians are called Parsis. It is because of the land from which they arrived. They reached Sanjan, a town in Gujarat, located on the banks of the Maroli River, where the local Hindu Ruler Jadi Rana welcomed them. An interesting apocryphal story is being told about the Parsis' settlement in India. When the newly landed Zoroastrians approached Jadi Rana for asylum, the king gestured with a vessel full of milk to signify that his kingdom was already whole and could not provide a space for the refugees. In response to the King, one Zoroastrian priest came forward and added a pinch of sugar to the milk, indicating that they would not make the vessel overflow; instead, they would make the native citizens sweeter, and it also suggested that migrants would assimilate with the locals like 'sugar in milk'. The symbolic gesture of the Parsi-priest showed that if the immigrants were given shelter, they would further bring prosperity to the land. The migrants' kind and gentle approach made the king grant them asylum and allow them to practice their own Zoroastrianism. The king also understood the new religious beliefs and customs, which were new to the Indian land, and the king was very pleased with the refugees.

The king asked the priest to narrate their literal requirements. The priest replied that they desired freedom as they were persecuted, freedom to raise their children in their own cultures and traditions, and they needed agricultural land for their survival as they would make themselves self-sufficient. On the requisition of the Parsis, the king allowed them to settle in the Hindu land and agreed to those demands by imposing five preconditions. The five stipulations were:

- 1) The immigrants should adopt the local language, 'Gujarati': (The Parsis also adopted the Gujarati language, and for generations, they have forgotten their traditional mother dialects. The census reports witness that Gujarati was the mother tongue of Parsi Indians.)
- 2) The women should adopt the local dress, the Sari: (Still, a woman of a traditional Parsi family wears a sari in the Gujarati fashion, which is draped over the right shoulder with one end tucked at the back and the other end falls in the front).
- 3) They should never use arms against the host land. (They handed over all their weapons and kept their promised words even now.)
- 4) The immigrant refugees were asked to venerate the cow as it was worshiped with great respect by the Hindu religion. (Regarding this condition, the traditional Parsi Zoroastrians, in order to respect their religious faith, never take beef as their meat. It should also be noted that there are no religious taboos against eating beef.

- 5) The marriage ceremonies should be performed at night only. (It was important to note the stipulation imposed by the king, who thought that such a ceremony would not attract their subjects, and hence the danger of conversion would be minimized. This condition also favors the immigrants as they do not want any Parsis to be converted to another religion, and the local Hindus also will not convert to Zoroastrianism. In the subcontinent, the Parsis still perform their marriages during the night only in their Fire Temples, where the non-Parsis are not allowed even today.

The Parsi-priest accepted the conditions and founded the settlement of Sanjan. The Parsis were very much grateful to the king, and the king was emotionally moved by their sincere commitment, and soon he was allowed to settle in his kingdom. Later, they erected their first Fire Temple in India. Later, the Fire was taken to Udvada in the year 1742, the most important of its kind on the Indian subcontinent.

The process of assimilation in an alien land was thus absorbed in this way by the 'Dustoor', a Parsi priest. The assimilated Parsis strictly follow the words of the door. Even today, one could see the characteristic adaptability of this minority community, which leads them to thrive in a country of such diverse culture and religion. It was also the reason behind India's becoming a secular country. However, the Parsi critic, Nilufer Bharucha, argues that the conditions, such as adopting and obeying customs, languages, and dress, but not intermarrying with the local population and never proselytizing, led to feelings of alienation within the community. She points out that, 'These unequal conditions provide the ambivalent feeling of simultaneous identification with and alienation from India can be traced back to this rather oppressive agreement' (Bharucha, RM: EETS 26)

Bahman Kaikobad Hamjiar Sanjana composed a sacred verse, Qissa-i-Sanjan, an epic poem of eight hundred and sixty-four lines completed in the year 1599. The verse recorded the existing account of the early years of Zoroastrian refugees in India. The composition of the verse suggests that it might have been written at least six centuries after the arrival of the immigrants. An English translation was also made by E.B. Eastwick in 1844 and published in the first volume titled *Journal of the Bombay Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*. The immigrant Parsis must have originated from the Khorasan Province. The word Khorasan is a Persian name which means 'where the sun rises'. The Khorassan was also called Traxiane during the Parthian and Hellenistic period. It was a province in Northeastern Iran. The region includes the present-day Iran, Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan.

Until the 17th century, the Parsis were called Zarthoshti, 'Zoroastrian' or Behdin, meaning 'Of good nature or religion in India. Assimilating in countries like India was a difficult task in their earlier periods. However, they needed to safeguard their religion and their culture. Parsis are open-minded, and they are also known for their discipline and their helping tendency. They worked hard in the new land they settled. They utilized the opportunities properly. They acted wisely whenever the situation demanded. The commercial treaty made between the Mughal Emperor and James I of England was an excellent opportunity for the Parsis, a farming community. They

utilized the job offers of the British East India Company. The company leased the seven islands in Bombay from Charles II of England. On the east coast of the island, the company found a deep harbor, and the Britishers were in the urge to settle their first port in the subcontinent. The Parsis were very loyal to the British. While the Indian languages were a barrier to their business, it was the Parsis who picked up the foreign Language English quickly. In India, the Parsis were the first to embrace English language education, and they became the most westernized community. They also trusted the Parsis, and in turn, the Parsis occupied several important posts in connection with the British Government and public works.

The role played by the Parsis in the national freedom movement was deeply significant. Dadabhai Naoroji was one of the founders of the Indian National Congress. He was popularly known as the 'Grand Old Man of India' and the 'Unofficial Ambassador of India'. He was the first Indian elected to the British Parliament, the first Indian to sit on a Royal Commission. In 1893, as the first Asian to occupy a seat in the British Parliament, Naoroji spoke: *'Whether I am a Hindu, a Mohammedan, a Parsi, a Christian, or of any other creed, I am above all an Indian. Our country is India, and our nationality is Indian.* The speech inspired many Indians and made them take an active part in the Indian freedom struggle movement. S.H. Jhabwala, another important figure in the national freedom movement, was jailed in the Meerut conspiracy. Bhikaiji Rustom Cama was one of the female activists in the Indian independence movement. She was the first Parsi woman who unfurled the first vision of the flag of Indian independence on August 21, 1907, in an international Socialist Conference held at Stuttgart, Germany.

On par with the diaspora, unlike other communities, the Parsi community encountered multiple diasporas. At first, the Diaspora from Iran to Gujarat, where the Persians acquired the new identity as Parsi-Zoroastrians and had to live under a Hindu Dispensation; then they spent time under the muslim rulers of India, under the Mughal Empire. After this, their next diaspora was spent in British Colonial rule. From India, they migrated to Canada as South Asian origin. Notable Indian writers have migrated to Canada; they are Rohinton Mistry, Uma Paramesswari, Michael Ondaatje, Himani Banerjee, Yasmin Ladha, Surjeet Kalsey, and others. In the rapidly changing world scene, there needs to be a writer to maintain the identity of the Parsi community. There are several Parsi writers in India: Bapsi Sidwa, Rohinton Mistry, Boman Desai, Bejan Daruwalla, Ardashir Vakil, Dina Mehta, D.F. Karaka, Nergis Dalal, and others. All these Parsi writers are conscious of their identity crisis, and they write with this realization. The contributions of these writers to literature are significant. Their writings have brought them immense fame and elevated them in the social hierarchy. All the works of these novelists reflect the history of India and their Parsi Community in different ways.

Dosabhai Framji Karaka, an early Parsi novelist, was a reputed journalist. He wrote novels in the 1840s and 1850s. In England, he wrote the book 'The Parsis: Their History, Manners, Customs and Religion' in 1858. This book provides an in-depth insight into the followers of the little-known Zoroastrian faith, which originated in

ancient Persia. The object of this work is to make the English Public acquainted with the history, belief, and manners of the Parsees, who, though unimportant in point of numbers they have their commercial habits, formed an important link between the English in India and the native inhabitants.

Nergis Dalal, a Parsi writer, has been writing for over fifty years. She was the author of four novels. In 1967, she wrote 'Minari' as her first novel. Minari was a fictitious place, but the descriptions are based on Mt. Abu. Dalal's other novels are: The Sisters, The Girls From Overseas, and Skin Deep. Her last Skin Deep is a novel of a psychological study of non-identical twins with a Parsi background. They also explore how societal perceptions of beauty influence attitudes and how the 'beautiful' twin is favored. Perin Barucha, an Indian Parsi writer. She wrote only one novel, titled 'The Fire Worshipers', published in 1968. The novel stressed the customs of the Parsi community. The novel also portrays the problems in inter-caste marriages and the contentious issues of interfaith marriages. The novel describes the Parsi Ethnicity in a rapidly changing India and how the Parsi community is experiencing a decline in its population, or instead becoming assimilated into the greater society of the country. The novel also highlights the concept of ethical purity through the character of Nariman, an idealist, who wants to marry outside his family. Pestonji, the father of Nariman, opposed the idea of marrying a non-Parsi lady, Portia Roy. Rohinton Mistry's Family Matters also deals with the same problem. Bharucha's The Fire Worshipers provides a fascinating snapshot of the Parsi class structure in post-independence Bombay.

Dina Mehta, a prominent stay-at-home Parsi novelist, is not an expatriate. She was the author of several short stories, novels, and plays. In the city of Mumbai, the playgoers are immensely impressed by her play titled 'Brides are not for Burning'. Mehta's novel 'And Some Take a Lover' centers on a proposed inter-caste marriage between a sophisticated girl, Miss Roshni Wadia, and the simple guardian boy, Sudhir. The novel's typical Parsi paradoxes, identity crisis, apprehensions, and political debates are beautifully discussed.

Keki N. Daruwalla is one of the most remarkable writers in India. Though he belongs to the Parsi Community, he prefers to be remembered as an Indian Poet in English. He does not pay much attention to his Parsi community; instead, he rarely makes references to the Tower of Silence and other similar Parsi symbols. Bapsi Sidhwa called herself a Punjabi-Parsi. She is a Pakistani American novelist who lives in the United States. She was born in Karachi, then a part of the British colony of India, and she was brought up in the city of Lahore, Pakistan. Her works are: *Their Language of Love*, *Jungle Wala Sahib*, *City of Sin and Splendour: Writings on Lahore*. *Water, Cracking India*, originally published as *Ice Candy Man* and the *Cow Eaters*. Her works focus on life under colonial rule, the history and background of Partition, the experiences of the Parsi Community, and the experience of immigrating from South Asia to the United States. Many of the events in her novel resemble real occurrences in her life.

Firdaus Kanga, an Indian born British writer, was born in 1960 in Mumbai. He was an active journalist. His 'Trying to Grow' is a semi-autobiographical novel set in India. It is a novel about a young Brit growing up with brittle bones. The protagonist of

the novel is a boy of four feet who never grows. He finds his way into the world of sexuality and adulthood. The novel does not allow gender or disability to embed a growing Brit's desire for sex and love. The novel is set in and describes humorously the Parsi Community in Bombay. Kanga was the author of a travel book, *Heaven On Wheels*, about his experiences in London, where he met Stephen Hawking. He is also the author of *Godmen*. It is clear that all these Parsi writers, whether they are expatriates or stay-at-home Parsi writers, are consciously engaged in an active exploration of marginality.

Rohinton Mistry is one of the diasporic and mainstream Indian writers of the Third World. It is the need of the day to understand the pangs of the declining Parsi community, who are being thrown out of the mainstream dominant culture of the society. This research has taken the Indian born Canadian novelist Rohinton Mistry for the study. Rohinton Mistry was the middle son of Behram Mistry and Freny Jhaveri Mistry, born on July 3, 1952, in Bombay. Cyrus Mistry, a playwright and short story writer, is Rohinton's younger brother. Mistry's father was in the field of advertising, and his mother was a homemaker like any Parsi mother of his community. Mistry recalls his mother in an interview with Angela Lambert: *'She was happy in that role, doing the miracle that all mothers perform of making what was barely enough seem like abundance. We did not have new clothes and shoes as often as we might have liked, but we were certainly better off than the population.* Mistry's mother might have been the model for some of his female characters. Dilnavaz in *Such a Long Journey* resembles Mistry's mother, who manages to keep the family afloat against all kinds of struggles.

The characters Mistry portrays in his *Tales from Firozsha Baag* are people of his community, and their rituals are portrayed as being bound to their Zoroastrian religion. On seeing the identity-forming elements of Parsiness, Kulke comments: "the Zoroastrian faith, a shared history of flight from Iran and refuge in India, a colonial elite consciousness and feelings of unease in decolonized India". It is not an exaggeration if anyone says that Mistry's *Tales from Firozsha Baag* electrified the literary scene in the year 1987. It has a common thread of Parsi tradition, social practices, nostalgic experiences, the issues of the one and the young, and the dilemma arising out of the migration. The characters in the collection are the mouthpiece of Mistry. He has no intention to expose the flaws in the characters; instead, he tries to portray realistic characters, though with no extraordinary accomplishments. The characters can touch the hearts of the reader. That is the success of the writer that Mistry has won countless readers.

Conclusion:

The Parsis had emerged as the foremost people in India in enriching the host land, India, and Indian English Literature. On par with the diaspora, unlike other communities, the Parsi Community encountered multiple diasporas. At the outset, it was from Iran to Gujarat where the Parsis acquired the new identity as Parsi Zoroastrians and had to live under a Hindu Dispensation. They spent time under the muslim rulers of India, under the Mughal Empire. After this, their next diaspora was spent in British colonial rule. From India, they migrated to various parts of the World

as people of South Asian origin. Wherever they move as a guest or a host, they are welcomed as an Indian Parsi. The role played by the Parsis in the Indian National Movement and the contribution made by the Parsi writers to Indian English Literature are immense and most considerable.

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