



DEPICTION OF PARI COMMUNITY IN TRYING TO GROW BY FIRDAUS KANGA: A STUDY

Somnath Mahato
Assistant Professor.

ABSTRACT

The Parsis, the follower of the prophet Zoroaster of ancient Iran, migrated to India in the 8th to 10th century A.D, seeking refuge when Iran was conquered by Muslim invaders. The fall of the Parsi empire resulted in the disintegration of the entire civilization, culture and religion. These people who had come to India with urn containing their sacred fires, the symbol of their faith, were known as 'Parsis' after the Iranian province of 'Pars'. Firdaus kanga is an Indian born Parsi novelist as well as an actor who now lives in London. His novel Trying to Grow (1990) is semi autobiographical and set in urban India, about Daryus Kotwal (Brit), the protagonist's growth from childhood to adulthood. Daryus Kotwal, the Parsi boy who is, afflicted with a crippling disease called Osteogenesis Imperfecta, which causes his bones to be brittle and confined him life long to a wheel chair. The novel is set in and very humorously describes the Parsi community in Bombay. This paper will focus on the Parsi community, culture, customs, rituals, identity, fear of extinction among the Parsi in the post Independent India.



KEY WORDS : Parsi, Community, Ethnicity customs, Protagonist, Zoroaster, Identity Extinction.

INTRODUCTION

Trying to grow is an autobiographical novel exploring disability, sexuality and culture. Trying to Grow was latter turned into an award winning BBC-BFI film "SIXTH HAPPINESS" for which Firdaus Kanga wrote the screenplay and in which he plays the role of an actor. The novel is a poignantly touching and moving story of the growth from childhood to adulthood of a Parsi boy who is afflicted with crippling discase, Osteogenesis Imperfecta which causes his bones to be brittle like biscuits and confines him life long to a wheel chair.

Kanga's major focus in the novel is to delineate the life of Parsis. Since the writer himself belongs to the parsi community, it is natural that the exclusive life of the community gets illustrated in the novel. According to the story the novel set in Bombay, told through the eyes of young Daryus Kotwal, son of Sam and Sera and brother of Dolly. Older than Daryus, Dolly serves as his best friends and his nurse, often sacrificing her own happiness for the sake of his handicapped brother. As most of the characters in the novel are parsis, naturally the parsi community gets well expressed. Regarding this community's recent generation palkhivala, an eminent critic observes;

"They will become a decadent community with glorious past, a perilious present and a dim future."

The novel Trying to Grow celebrates the social life of Westernized Parsees. As we see that the whole novel becomes a story of a cripple boy who is trying to grow. The novel reflects his growth from childhood to his youth. His conflicts, struggles and willingness suitably presented. Sam and Sera, Brit's parents, look down upon everything Indian including Hindu religion, Indian family life and Indian hotels. They consciously identify themselves with the coloniser. Kanga provides very vividly an intimate glimpse into the working of

the Westernized parsee psyche. Brit, on the other hand, takes the stance of an outsider and observes with neutral interest. Following lines also indicates the parsis in form of reluctant Indians.

“Parsees have this nauseating habit of slumming when they went to eat Indian food which means non Parsi food, since we are reluctant Indians. My family happily spent four hundred rupees at Taj Mahal Hotel on an English meal, bland as ulcer diet, but when it came to trying out some tongue scorching, tasty food, they made a bee line for the cheapest joint they could sniff out.”

The parsis predilection for westernised life, Kanga seems to suggest, is absurd since it is out of tune with the realities of the times. His observation that parsees are ‘reluctant Indians’ captures the spirit of the westernised zoroastrian community.

The Parsis are well known for their indiosyncrasies, superstitious belief and typical sense of humour. At the opening of the novel shows an old man warding off the Evil spirit that is always ready to pounce on parsis when they are not looking. As he believes in the efficacy of prayer, the old man wants to know from Brit’s father whether or not there is special parsis prayer for children with physical deformities so that he can say them.

“I was joking, said father laying a hand on his snapping fingers. I am taking him to a holy man wagh Baba. May be he will cure my son.”

The Parsis celebrate their New year’s Day with traditional gaiety and excitement surrounded by their family and relatives. The local fire temple would be crowded with the worshippers of colorful stylish clothes. In spite of all the above they are said to be not so religious. Brit’s remark in this be not so religious. Brit’s remark in this regard appears very interesting. “We Parsis don’t take our religion too seriously, those who do are considered down right dangerous and a little mad.”

The novelist also highlights the Parsi custom of celebrating birthdays twice following two calendars - Parsee and Christian. According to the narrator when he quotes, “All of us had two birth days; there was one that we celebrated on the date were born, and the other which stepped back one day every leap year, was by the calendar we’d carried across from Persia. Besides this during funeral and wedding ceremonies Parsis wear special dress. The parsis took the dead body to the vultures in the Tower of Silence (Dokhma).

The Parsis have also a funny way during the time of naming of their children. In this novel we find names like Sam, Sera, Brit, Dolly, Tina and so on. The narrator Observes.

“We delight in stretching, snipping and squashing given names out of all recognition, with a view to making them roll off the tongue easily and perhaps, even sound English. So boys who are named Faredon become Freddy, Nowroji becomes Neville, Adi becomes Eddy and everyone is delighted with his new name and what he hopes is his new image.”

In this way Dolly is changed to ‘Daulat’ which Brit’s parents think is auspicious because it means wealth.

The Parsis have, as the novel reflects, a peculiar concept of marriage. Focusing on the marriage habits of the parsis, the narrator points out.

“Young Parsee man have this inbuilt resistance to getting married when they are about thirty five they suddenly panic at the thought of lonely old age and get married.”

Regarding this, love marriage are the tradition in all good parsis families. When Defarge remarks that Sera’s daughter is twenty four, graduate and earning and still not married, Sera expresses her helplessness in this matter.

“What do I do?” Said sera complacently. ‘She refuses to let me arrange any boys for her to see. Anyway, it does not worry me. Love marriages are a tradition in our family like in all good parsee families.’

Dolly happened to fall in love with Salim a Muslim which made Sam and Sera talk about the attitude of the Parsis to the Muslims.

“The Muslims are the traditional, nay, the historical enemies of the Parsees. And to give yourself to one of them is a shameful act of betrayal, nay, High Treason.”

Sera cannot ignore the historical fact that the Muslim ill treated the Parsis and made them pitiful refugees in India.

The novel also focuses on the issue of mixed marriage which the endangered community is facing today. Dolly, Brit's sister, resolves to marry a Muslim. Dolly, though an 'emancipated girl is compelled to marry a Muslim since she fails to find a suitable boy in the Parsi community. In this part Kanga presents the history, faith customs, rituals, anxieties and concerns and various cultural ceremonies of the Zoroastrian religion. The fear of extinction of loosing identity, of a culture disappearing have prompted the literary talents of the community to map a space for themselves and for posterity.

The chief concern of the Parsis regarding, declining population inter faith marriages, funeral rites, attitude towards girl child, alienation, traditionalist vs modernist attitude of religion and fear of extinction due to slower birth rate, migration, late marriages, inter faith marriage etc. and ethnic anxieties very vividly portrayed by the novelist. Trying to grow is also a reflection of the Zoroastrian ethos. It voices the ambivalence, the nostalgia and the dilemma of the endangered miniscule community.

Finally to conclude with the remark of Bapsi Sidwa in an interview.

"Firdaus Kanga met me in London", - She says, "and very sweetly said; he did not think Parsis could be worth writing about, and with humour, till her novel the Crow Eaters." Whether this was his motivation, in his fiction and other prose Kanga has been very interested in portraying Parsi community, whether in Bombay or in London."

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