

The Portrayal of the slowly depleting Parsi community in Thrity Umrigar's *The Bombay Time*.

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Abstract: The present research portrays the depleting parsi community and their struggle for survival. This novel taken for analysis is a clear representation of the fragmented childhood of Thrity Umrigar a parsi writer. Since it is her debut novel, it is only fitting for her to write about her roots, her childhood and her community. The writing is fragmented just like any diasporic writer, but Thrity umrigar has woven each character and their lives so intricately through their middle class housing complex, childhood and their community. This common blanket that brings all the characters of this novel together. The title of the book itself signifies reminiscences of the old time it refers to Bombay as Bombay and not Mumbai as it is referred now by the millennials. The characters all talk about Bombay and they all delve into the past and take a walk on memory lane. They all talk about how they were, their ideologies, their dreams their pasts and everything.

Thrity Umrigar in her novel *The Bombay Time*, she takes us on a walk through memory lane or to be exact a walk through her fragmented childhood. But she has weaved her characters beautifully and it is exactly like a walk through memory lane a lot of detail has been given to each character and each character is beautifully woven about how their lives and the community has played a huge role and a safe haven for the parsi community, the depletion of their community is shown through the characters themselves, some go abroad and marry outside of their community, not only community but nationality too, like Rusi's daughter Binny. Rusi on the other hand keeps this as a secret from all the other members of the community. "And yet, the lingering feeling of shame and disappointment remained, like a fish bone in the throat. Every time he attended a wedding, there was a moment he saw Binny and jack in the place of the bride and groom. Rusi knew that Parsi custom would not permit Binny to have a religious ceremony with a non-Parsi, but he would like to have had a reception." It is not only the millennials who are the reason for the depletion of the Parsi community but few of the older generation are also to be blamed. The older generations like soli contractor, who lost his youth to a girl he loved and he never married. Others died of natural disasters, like in the case of Cyrus, he died in a factory explosion, and his wife Tehmi never remarried again. So the depletion had slowly begun from the older generation and sneakily paved its way to the younger generation.

Diaspora Theory with its various features has influenced the literature of every language of the world. This literature is widely known as Expatriate or Diasporic Literature. It would be proper to examine features and aspects of such literature in which Indian Writing in English not only contributed greatly but also received international recognition and admiration in the past few years.

Diasporic Literature is a very vast concept and an umbrella term that includes in it all those literary works written by the authors outside their native country, but these works are associated with native culture and background. In this wide context, all those writers can be regarded as diasporic writers, who write outside their country but remained related to their homeland through their works. Diasporic literature has its roots in the sense of loss and alienation, which emerged as a result of migration and expatriation. Generally, diasporic literature deals with alienation, displacement, existential rootlessness, nostalgia, quest of identity. It also addresses issues related to amalgamation or disintegration of cultures. It reflects the immigrant experience that comes out of the immigrant settlement. Uma Parameswaran has defined it as follows; "first is one of nostalgia for the homeland left behind mingled with fear in a strange land. The second is a phase in which one is busy adjusting to the new environment that there is little creative output. The third phase is the shaping of diaspora existence by involving themselves ethnocultural issues. The fourth is when they have 'arrived' 42 and start participating in the larger world of politics and national issues." (Quoted, Parmeswaran, 165) The immigrants, whatever their reason for migration be, financial, social, political, no matter whether they migrated for trade and commerce, as religious preachers, as labourers, convicts, soldiers, as expatriates or refugees, exiles (forced or voluntary), or as guest workers in search of better life and opportunities have shared some common things as well as differences which are based on their conditions of migration and period of stay in the adopted land. Mostly the migrants suffer from the pain of being far off from their homes, the memories of their motherland, the anguish of leaving behind everything familiar agonizes the minds of migrants. William Safran has observed that; "they continue to relate personally or vicariously, to the homeland in a way or another, and their ethnic-communal consciousness and solidarity are importantly defined by the existence of such a relationship." (Quoted, Safran, 1991:23) The diasporic Indians too, do not break their relationship with the ancestral land. There is a search for continuity and 'ancestral impulse', an effort to look for their roots. Settlement in alien land makes them experience dislocation. Dislocation can be considered as a break with the old identity. They experience the sense of loneliness in an alien land feel as they face non-acceptance by the host society and also experience ethnic discrimination. The immigrants attempt to assimilate, adapt and amalgamate with the society of their host country. Their attempts of adaptation and adjustment are not without their concern to maintain their original culture and identity. The marginal groups try to guard themselves against the dominant host group. The most important means used for insulation is the continuation of the cultural practices and social traditions. The first generation immigrants are always concerned with keeping the social, cultural baggage which consists of among other things their religion, language, music, art, dress, cuisine, etc. intact. Conscious attempts are made by the diasporic communities to pass their traditions to the future generation.

The experiences of these cultural elements have been varied in different diasporic situations. Some of these elements have vanished, some have persisted or survived, others have experienced assimilation, 43 syncretism or change, and few elements ought to be rejuvenated. The immigrants in these situations are compelled to feel that they stand on the borderline belonging neither to their motherland nor their adopted country. In their attempt to integrate with the adopted culture while maintaining their inheritance, they

develop a dual identity, and their culture becomes a sandwich culture. Their efforts for assimilation and failure to do so dishearten them. The feeling of rootlessness, alienation, confusion, nostalgia, dislocation and sufferings due to discrimination on the basis of race, culture, religion and language concludes into conflicts, fight for identity and on the other hand lead to birth of feeling of marginality in the minority group. This results in the creation of a fractured identity. As they torn between the two places and two cultures and often languages; the expatriate writer navigates a new literary space. The diasporic literature arises under these circumstances. The broken psyche of the immigrants sheds off its psychosis into writing. Therefore, the migrant writer feels a forceful need to write and with their multicultural ethos and a profound understanding of socio-cultural and economic realities around them, they have been successful in transforming their experiences into writings. Another important reason for writing by the creative talent in the diasporic community is to make their existence recognized. The very act of creation is a purposeful effort to form a cultural identity.

Diasporic writing unfolds these experiences of unsettlement and dislocation, at some or the other level. A diasporic text can be investigated in terms of location, dislocation and relocation. The changing designation of home and accompanying nervousness about homelessness and unfeasibility of going back are recurrent themes in diasporic literature. The expatriate literature also deals mostly with the inner conflict in the context of cultural displacement. The immigrants away from the families fluctuate between crisis and reconstruction. They are thrice alienated from the native land they left behind, from their new host country and their children. Diaspora literature is in constant conversation with the metahome. The longing to regain lost home often culminates in the creation of a different version of home. As Salman Rushdie observers; 44 “--- one physical alienation from India at almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of redeeming precisely the thing that was lost, that will, in short, create fictions not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indians of mind.” (Rushdie, 1991:10) Nostalgia, loss, betrayal and duty are the foundations of new homes as diasporic protagonist adjust to new countries. In adjusting to new countries, issues of acculturation and assimilation become the central point as these immigrants negotiate the unbalance of their hyphenated identities. Usually, the first generation diaspora clings to food and clothes as the most obvious markers of Indianness that sets them apart and highlights their difference. The insistence on this difference is often a conscious declaration of belonging to another place. On the other hand, second generation diaspora declines and removes such identity markers to assimilate the dominant culture.

In the field of literature it is openly accepted, writers settling in foreign lands. Back then it would just be a short visit to the foreign land, but now a days due to certain circumstances writers leave their hometown to settle in a foreign land, for various reasons and become a permanent resident of the land they decide to settle in. However current writers use their homeland as their backdrop for most of their writings, themes, characters etc. “Ah, Bombay, Rusi thought. What a place. City of dreams and city of awakening from dreams. Home of Dharavi, Asia’s largest slum and home of genteel, pristine Cricket Club of India. Birth place of Zubin Mehta, world famous music conductor, and of Ragu, the beggar boy blinded at birth by his father, who hoped his act of love would increase the flow of coins of pity in his son’s begging bowl. City of savage love and city of savage hate. City where the golden skyscrapers kissed God in heaven and the black slums found hell on earth.” (BT26). They use their fragmented memories to weave a novel, a poem or prose or any work. Their longing and displacement in the foreign land is clearly evident in their writing. They adapt themselves to the foreign land they settle in with the memories of their home land and they try to relate it with their fragmented memories of their homeland. This is very evident in all the diasporic writers novels, the longing, the feeling of alienation, a sense of not belonging etc.

The Parsis are a community in India, that trace their identity to pre-Islamic, Zoroastrians Iran (pre-651 C.E.). The Parsis presently number approximately 110,000 individuals worldwide, and over 70,000 individuals in India. The Parsis are the descendants of Iranian Zoroastrians who migrated to settle in India to preserve their Zoroastrian religion. Zoroastrianism is the religion associated with the teachings and revelations of the Iranian prophet and priest Zarathustra, or Zoroaster as referred to by the ancient Greeks. Zarathustra and his religious message date from the second millennium B.C.E. (c. 1200-1000 B.C.E.). Zoroastrianism was the first major religion of Iran and a living faith in the ancient world. It was developed following the division between the Indo-Iranian ‘Aryan’ people who migrated from the steppes of Asia to the Middle-East, Iranian Plateau, and the North-western India, during the second half of the second half of the second millennium.

The evolution and transformation of Zoroastrianism are the consequences of its history. The Parsis of India would be greatly affected by its variegated history. The Parsis incorporated the entire tradition of Zoroastrianism from Zarathustra through Sasanian Zoroastrianism as part of their religious heritage. They would seek to preserve its essential elements while reinterpreting Zoroastrianism in the context of their own evolution as a community.

The Zoroastrians of India came to be known as Parsis, i.e. ‘Persians’ and as their name implies, for the parsis, the sense of their ancestral past remains both relevant and important. The Parsi also refer to themselves as ‘Zarathustrians,’ ‘zarathosti’ ‘Mazdayasnans,’ to signify their religious identity as followers of the message of Zarathustra and as a worshiper of Ahura Mazad. In India Parsis became a prosperous and influential community, retaining the characteristics of an ethnic and religious minority. The story of the Parsis begins with their arrival in India, which according to the Parsi tradition, was in the 8th century.

The arrival of Parsi in India posed the question of how a small minority would integrate itself into the new dominant social milieu, while retaining the essence of its identity. The history of the Parsi in India is that of their attempts to maintain their Zoroastrian identity in the midst of accommodation the Indian milieu. The Traditional narratives of the Parsis relate to the assimilation and accumulation that had begun with their integration into the Indian setting. Parsi tradition holds that on arriving in India, the Parsis were hesitantly welcomed by the local Hindu ruler of Gujarat, identified as Jadi Rana. Conditions were attached to the Parsi settlement in the territory of the local rajah. These conditions included the Parsis forsaking their weapons and becoming peaceful subjects of the rajah, adopting the local language and dress and observing the performance of their marriage ceremonies after sunset; or in general observing their ceremonies in the manner of the locals. With the exception of their religion, the Parsis believed their assimilation to the Indian cultural milieu as conditional to their acceptance and safe existence in India. The unique cultural configuration of the parsi community taking shape is evident in the tales of the Parsi settlement in India. The process of the parsis casting their cultural characteristics, and distinguishing their customs and norms from other Indians gains significance in the new setting.

It is beyond doubt that the Parsis have left no field of creative work to which they have not contributed. There are so many Parsi writers like Rohinton Mistry, Bapsi Sidhwa, Firdaus Kanga, Farrukh Dhondy, Boman Desai, Dina Mehta and many others. The trend of Parsi authors in English started a century ago with behram Malabari, the poet, who was one of the earliest Indians to write poetry in English. In the twentieth century another well known Parsi writers was Cornelia Sorabji who published three volumes of interesting short stories *Love and Life behind the Purdah* (1901), *Sun Babies* (1904) and *Between the Twilights*(1908) And two autobiographical works. D.F. Karka Dalal who published some novels during 1940s and 1950s. Nergis Dalal published four novels in 1960s and 1970s.

In short the parsi writers including Rohinton Mistry, Bapsi Sidhwa, Boman Desai, Dina Mehta, Firdaus Kanga, Farukh Dhondy and others are fully conscious of the fact their community is fast disappearing. The Parsi writers through their works intend to preserve their ethnicity for ages to come. This is the reason why most of the parsi writers assert their ethnic identity in their creative writing. The way the community is disappearing no one knows how long they will survive.

Thrity Umrigar is the best-selling author of the novels *Bombay Time*, *The Space Between Us*, *If Today Be Sweet*, *The Weight of Heaven*, *The World We Found* and *The Story Hour*. She is also the author of the memoir, *First Darling of the Morning*. Her books have been translated into several languages and published in over fifteen countries. She is the Armington Professor of English at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland.

The Space Between Us was a finalist for the PEN/Beyond Margins award, while her memoir was a finalist for the Society of Midland Authors award. *If Today Be Sweet* was a Chautauqua Literary and Scientific Circle selection, while her other books have been Community Reads selections. Thrity is the winner of the Cleveland Arts Prize, a Lambda Literary award and the Seth Rosenberg Prize. Thrity was born in Bombay, India and came to the U.S. when she was 21. As a Parsi child attending a Catholic school in a predominantly Hindu country, she had the kind of schizophrenic and cosmopolitan childhood that has served her well in her life as a writer. Accused by teachers and parents alike of being a daydreaming, head-in-the-clouds child, she grew up lost in the fictional worlds created by Steinbeck, Hemingway, Woolf and Faulkner. She would emerge long enough from these books to create her own fictional and poetic worlds. Encouraged by her practical-minded parents to get an undergraduate degree in business, Thrity survived business school by creating a drama club and writing, directing and acting in plays. Her first short stories, essays and poems were published in national magazines and newspapers in India at the age of fifteen.

After earning a M.A. in journalism in the U.S., Thrity worked for several years as an award-winning reporter, columnist and magazine writer. She also earned a Ph.D. in English. In 1999, Thrity won a one-year Nieman Fellowship to Harvard University, which is given to mid-career journalist. While at Harvard, Thrity wrote her first novel, *Bombay Time*. In 2002 she accepted a teaching position at Case Western Reserve University, where she is now the Armington Professor of English. She also does occasional freelance pieces for national publications and has written for the Washington post and the Boston Globe's book pages. Thrity is active on the national lecture circuit and has spoken at book festivals such as the L.A. Festival of Books, the Tuscon Book Festival and the Miami Book Fair International; at universities such as MIT, Harvard University, and Spelman College; and at literary societies, civic and business organizations and public libraries all across the country.

The residents of Wadia Baug, a middle-class apartment building inhabited by Parsis, gather for a wedding. The journeys to and from the wedding form short narrative bookends for the wedding itself, the principal present action. The narrator, however, is more interested in past than present, and so the paragraphs devoted to the wedding are often just weak excuses to explore bygone times. The result is a thin present with little drama, but a rich past with detailed accounts, sometimes amusing, sometimes lyrical, sometimes sad, of the characters' individual histories and their eventual intersecting, the whole sometimes reading like summaries. Dosa Popat, an embittered widow and Wadia Baug's resident gossip, observes the guests' departures for the wedding and reflects on their stories while lamenting her own unrealized life—a promising academic career cut off before its beginning by a drunken promise of marriage made by her father. Jimmy Kanga, father of the groom, oversees the reception while considering the huge trajectory of his life from orphaned adolescence to law degree at Oxford, return to Bombay and life in the fast lane as a high-profile attorney, then a rejection of the high life for a return to his simpler, safer, and more satisfying Wadia Baug roots. Rusi and Coomi Bilimoria bitterly and sadly recall the failure of their marriage, ultimately achieving a tentative reconciliation on the bus ride home. At the close, all these individuals recede into the fabric of the city.

Umrigar's debut unfolds raga-like, the histories of its people forming sustained riffs that spring from and return to the same source. The minimal plotting is at times contrived and sentimental, but the portrait of the city and its citizens is authoritative, richly textured, and engaging.

Like any diasporic writer Thrity Umrigar has also spoken about her homeland and her experience in the new country, the alienation the sense of longing for the past and her home land the sense of familiarity. Like all literatures in diasporic literature place plays an important role, it gives the writer a sense of belonging a sense of rootedness to their culture and background no matter how westernised they become. Umrigar in her debut novel *The Bombay Time*, she talks about her hometown the city she once grew up in, the culture, the people and so on. She goes on great detail about the various places in Bombay and she gives the reader a tour through Bombay and gives the reader a visual treat of the places Juhu and Chowpatti, Marine Drive, Nariman Point, Elephanta Caves, Jehangir Art Gallery, Fashion Street, Cuffe Parade, Gateway of India, etc. Umrigar's nostalgia is evident in her writing, from the title itself she doesn't refer to Bombay as Mumbai like the millennia's do, she refers to it as Bombay, like she is referring to an old friend. Even her characters also refer to it as Bombay and there is a sense of nostalgia in each of their dialogues they talk about the past and how they once lived liked it was only yesterday.

Umrigar has set her novels backdrop in Bombay, her homeland. Since it is Umrigar's debut novel she has depicted her life in Bombay with her parsi apartment Wadia baug and all her characters are from her childhood neighbours. Her characters are also parsi and the minority feel insecure among the Maharashtrians. It is evident in the novel when the residents fight to protect each other when someone passes a snide remark against one of their own. Since they are a minority, for them their place of residence is a safe haven for

the characters, who have grown along with apartment. “For this dwindling, ethnic minority, the ‘baag’ becomes a communal refuge, a cultural bulwark against the fast-changing, ‘menacing’ city. For the author, both the ‘baag’ and the city become a fictional refuge, a means of rooting himself a new in the host country by digging in the soil of his old homeland” (1253). This statement of Shahani fits appropriately to Umrigar Her Parsi characters feel themselves safe within the walls of ‘WadiaBaug’ and Umrigar herself as a diasporic writers tries to root herself in the city of Bombay through it. The way she weaves her characters and the apartment housing is evident that she longs for her homeland and how the minority suffers. The culture of the parsis that is slowly depleting is depicted in great detail in the book, their customs for weddings and death, it is mentioned in clear detail in the book, it is more of a memory of all things umrigar has witnessed. Umrigar clearly portrays the routine of the Bombayites with a visual imagery of how their day begins; how the city looks like in the morning; the humdrum of the households etc. in this work. Her love for the city and her culture is evident cause all her characters are parsi and she talks about each character in detail from their adolescence to their old age she takes us on a journey with each character, she gives us the details and the stories behind, why each character is the way they are. What made them to be like this? Be it Dosamai or Tehmi, Rusi or Soli contractor, they all have their story, their little dark secrets, that make them, them. Umrigar has spent a great amount of time in creating each character and strangely enough all of them are parsis. And each one of them is somehow related to the other, and they all have ended up living in Wadia baug their safe haven and they have either grown on each other or in some cases grown apart from each other.

Their depletion of culture is evident when the younger generation decide to marry people outside of their community and the parents oblige cause they feel that certain dreams have to be broken in order to safe guard their children. Because the problems the minority face were nothing when compared to the small sacrifices they made for their children. It was evident when, Rusi was attending Mehernosh’s wedding, he couldn’t help but imagine his own daughter Binny on the wedding stage, getting married in the parsi tradition. But it is against their tradition to marry outside of the community, so his daughter’s marriage to an outsider remains a secret from all the others. “And yet, the lingering feeling of shame and disappointment remained, like a fish bone in the throat. Every time he attended a wedding, there was a moment he saw Binny and Jack in the place of the bride and the groom” (BT 246).

The westernisation or the diasporic element is evident cause Thrity Umrigar has weaved in her western influence, when she talks about Miriam and how her family talk about music and how all the others let their children study abroad. Something that was not possible for them to do. They feel a sense of relief that the American dream has not swallowed up another Parsi cause their community is slowly depleting, and strength lies in the masses. So they are all happy and proud when, a boy from their Wadia Baug returns back from America they all breathe a sigh of relief, that he is not swayed by the American Dream, but decided to return unlike the others, who left and never returned. “Mehernosh was a sweet, intelligent boy and, like many Wadia Baug residents, Rusi was delighted when Mehernosh returned from America. It felt like a victory of sorts, a boy snatched from the jaws of the monster that had swallowed up so many Parsi children.”(BT 246) So it was double celebration, that was being celebrated till their bubble was burst, and this bubble was burst, when they were out of their safe haven “Wadia Baug”. Cause the entire community was invited to the wedding and a select few were requested to stay back for another after party, and all of them were Parsis and from Wadia Baug.

Their safe haven was burst when they least expected it; it was destroyed when they were reminiscing about the past and cherishing the memories they had shared together and how Wadia Baug grew along with them. Their bubble was burst by an attack from a beggar outside. They shook in fear when one of their own was attacked and they all wanted to leave at the soonest boarding a van that will take them back to their safe haven. They all wanted to rush home and be safe in Wadia Baug. “How relaxed, how expansive they had felt an hour ago. And now they were fleeing like common criminals, fleeing from the imaginary and no imaginary demons of the night.” This is common feeling felt by any minority, when they are on unknown lands. And for the characters felt at Mehernosh Kanga’s wedding, they were outside their comfort zone. And so when they were brought back to their safe haven, they couldn’t help but breathe a sigh of relief. “A murmur went through the bus, when Wadia baug finally loomed in front of them. A gush of relief ran through Rusi. He felt as if he were the survivor of a ship wreck and the buildings were a large, majestic ship that would rescue him obviously, the others felt the same way.”(BT 270)

I conclude this paper saying that the Parsi are a slowly depleting, just like the animals that go extinct as days go by. Their culture and heritage is slowly depleting, due to various reasons. And they all hold on to their dreams and they all believe that one day the Parsis will rise again, she ends it in a positive note. They all believe that one day they will rise again. The dream that the younger parsi generation like Mehernosh, who said no to the American dream, will make their community survive. She ends it with the line “they will choose memory over imagination. It is less dangerous that way.” (BT271). Because they cannot imagine what the future will be like for the parsis, they only have, hope and memories of what they once were.

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