



Ethnicity, Memory, and Belonging: A Study of Parsi Identity in English Novels

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Abstract

This paper examines the representation of Parsi ethnicity in English novels and explores how memory, migration, minority consciousness, and cultural preservation shape Parsi social identity. As a small but influential Zoroastrian community in the Indian subcontinent, Parsis occupy a unique position within postcolonial discourse—simultaneously insiders and outsiders, modern yet tradition-bound, diasporic yet deeply rooted. Through a close reading of select works by writers such as Rohinton Mistry, Bapsi Sidhwa, and Farrukh Dhondy, this study investigates how fiction constructs ethnic memory and negotiates belonging within the frameworks of nationalism, diaspora, and modernity. The paper argues that English novels by and about Parsis function as cultural archives that preserve communal identity while simultaneously critiquing internal orthodoxy and external marginalization.

Introduction

Ethnicity and social identity are central concerns in postcolonial literary studies. Minority communities often rely on narrative to articulate their histories, anxieties, and aspirations. Among such communities, the Parsis—descendants of Zoroastrians who migrated from Persia to India around the 8th century—represent a compelling case of cultural resilience and adaptation. Although numerically small, Parsis have had a disproportionate influence on Indian commerce, law, industry, and literature. Their liminal position—neither fully assimilated nor entirely alien—makes them particularly significant in studies of belonging. English novels written by Parsi authors frequently engage with themes of decline, migration, nostalgia, intergenerational tension, and identity crisis. This paper explores how English fiction becomes a space where Parsi ethnicity is remembered, negotiated, and reimaged.

Review of Literature

Thomas Abraham (2006) process of cultural translation as it emerges in South Asian diasporic literature, with particular attention to its implications for minority communities such as the Parsis. Abraham argues that diasporic fiction serves as a crucial medium for translating cultural values, histories, and identities across linguistic and geographic boundaries. While his primary focus is on the broader South Asian experience, he underscores the unique case of the Parsi community as emblematic of the challenges of maintaining cultural specificity while engaging with globalized literary forms. Through the analysis of selected English novels, Abraham illustrates how cultural translation operates not only at the level of language but also through thematic representations of displacement, hybridity, and identity negotiation. He posits that Parsi authors employ narrative techniques that both preserve and reinterpret their cultural heritage, creating a space for dialogue between tradition and modernity.

Saima Anwar (2020) examines how Rohinton Mistry's novels articulate the complexities of Parsi community identity within the broader socio-political landscape of India. Anwar argues that Mistry's work provides a nuanced portrayal of the Parsi experience, highlighting themes of cultural cohesion, internal conflict, and the challenges posed by modernity and marginalization. Through detailed textual analysis, she explores how Mistry's characters embody the tensions between individual aspirations and collective responsibilities, reflecting broader questions about belonging and identity preservation in a minority community. Saima Anwar emphasizes that Mistry's fiction serves as a vital space for the representation of Parsi social realities, using narrative strategies that foreground communal values alongside personal struggles. Her study contributes to postcolonial literary scholarship by situating Mistry's work within ongoing dialogues about ethnicity, diaspora, and the negotiation of cultural identity in contemporary South Asian literature.

Anita Bhalla (2003) examines the intricate portrayals of family dynamics and emotional isolation within Rohinton Mistry's novel *Family Matters*. Bhalla argues that the novel provides



a poignant critique of the shifting familial roles and responsibilities within the aging Parsi community, particularly against the backdrop of urban Bombay. Through detailed narrative analysis, Anita Bhalla explores how Mistry uses the declining health of the protagonist, Nariman Vakeel, to expose deeper societal concerns about elder care, generational conflict, and the erosion of traditional family bonds. She how emotional estrangement and domestic pressures reflect broader issues of cultural decline and identity crisis within the Parsi community. Bhalla's study reveals that while familial structures are often idealized in Parsi fiction, *Family Matters* offers a more complex, sometimes painful, representation of kinship and care. Her work contributes to literary discussions on kinship and minority identity by situating familial disintegration as both a personal and communal struggle.

Historical and Cultural Background of the Parsi Community

The Parsis trace their origin to Zoroastrians fleeing Islamic conquest in Persia. Settling primarily in Gujarat and later Bombay (Mumbai), they adopted Gujarati language and many local customs while retaining religious distinctiveness.

Key features of Parsi identity include:

- Adherence to Zoroastrian religious rituals
- Emphasis on education and entrepreneurship
- Strong community institutions
- Endogamous marriage practices
- Anxiety over demographic decline

Their unique social positioning—privileged under British colonial rule and economically prosperous—contributed to both admiration and suspicion within nationalist discourse.

Theoretical Framework

This study draws upon:

- Ethnicity and identity theory (Stuart Hall)
- Collective memory (Maurice Halbwachs)
- Imagined communities (Benedict Anderson)
- Diaspora studies

Ethnic identity is understood not as fixed but as performative and constructed through narrative. Memory plays a vital role in sustaining minority identity across generations.

Rohinton Mistry: Memory, Decline, and Urban Belonging

The novels of Rohinton Mistry provide profound insights into Parsi life in post-independence India. Works such as *Such a Long Journey* and *Family Matters* portray middle-class Parsi families navigating political turmoil and internal fragmentation.

Collective Memory and Community Anxiety

Mistry frequently depicts:

- Nostalgia for a cohesive community past
- Fear of demographic extinction
- Generational conflicts over tradition

Bombay becomes not just a city but a symbolic homeland under threat from political corruption and urban transformation.

Minority Vulnerability

Parsi identity in Mistry's fiction is marked by:

- Marginalization in nationalist politics
- Economic insecurity
- Emotional isolation

The Emergency period serves as a backdrop highlighting the fragility of minority existence.

Bapsi Sidhwa: Gender, Partition, and Ethnic Consciousness

Bapsi Sidhwa offers a distinct perspective on Parsi identity within the context of Partition. In *Ice-Candy-Man* (also published as *Cracking India*), the child narrator Lenny embodies both innocence and minority detachment.



Parsis as Observers of History

During Partition, Parsis adopt a policy of neutrality. This neutrality reinforces:

- Their survival strategy
- Their ambiguous national belonging
- Their ethical dilemma

Gender and Community Control

Sidhwa also critiques patriarchal structures within Parsi society. Women’s bodies become symbolic sites where ethnic boundaries are policed.

Farrukh Dhondy and Diasporic Displacement

Farrukh Dhondy explores Parsi diasporic identity in Britain. His works highlight racial discrimination, migration anxieties, and cultural hybridity.

Here, Parsi identity intersects with:

- Immigrant subjectivity
- Postcolonial displacement
- Multicultural negotiation

Diaspora intensifies questions of belonging: Is identity rooted in religion, nation, or memory?

Themes in the Representation of Parsi Identity

Memory as Cultural Preservation

English novels act as repositories of:

- Ritual practices
- Linguistic markers
- Community humor
- Domestic spaces

Through storytelling, writers prevent cultural erasure.

Belonging and Alienation

Parsi characters often experience:

- Belonging without dominance
- Privilege without power
- Integration without assimilation

Their small population generates existential anxiety regarding extinction.

Decline and Demographic Crisis

Many narratives foreground low birth rates and migration as threats to continuity. Fiction becomes a lament and warning.

Negotiation of Modernity

Parsis are frequently portrayed as progressive and Westernized. However, this modernity creates tension with tradition.

Language and Humor as Ethnic Markers

Parsi English—inflected with Gujarati idioms—serves as a cultural signifier. Humor becomes:

- A coping mechanism
- A critique of authority
- A marker of community cohesion

Writers preserve oral storytelling traditions through English prose.

Parsi Identity in the Context of Indian Nationalism

Parsi novels complicate the narrative of Indian nationalism by presenting:

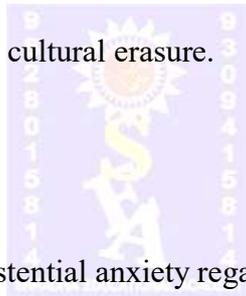
- A minority perspective
- Skepticism toward majoritarian politics
- Ambivalence toward national identity

They reveal how national belonging can be conditional for minorities.

Comparative Insights

Across these authors, common patterns emerge:

Theme	Mistry	Sidhwa	Dhondy
Memory	Nostalgic urban memory	Partition memory	Migrant memory





Belonging	Bombay-centric	Neutral survival	Diasporic negotiation
Anxiety	Decline & aging	Communal violence	Racial alienation

Despite differences in geography, all portray identity as fragile yet resilient.

Critical Evaluation

While these novels preserve Parsi identity, they also risk:

- Romanticizing decline
- Reinforcing insularity
- Overemphasizing victimhood

However, their self-critical tone prevents idealization.

Conclusion

English novels by Parsi writers serve as cultural archives that sustain ethnic memory while interrogating belonging in a postcolonial world. Through narrative, Parsis articulate both attachment and anxiety—attachment to a homeland and anxiety about disappearance.

Ethnicity in these works is not static; it is negotiated through memory, migration, gender politics, and urban transformation. Ultimately, the literature reveals that belonging is not guaranteed by numbers or power but constructed through storytelling.

In representing themselves, Parsi authors transform fiction into a site of survival, remembrance, and identity formation.

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