

The Representation of Identity and Diaspora in Modern Parsi Fiction

Prof. Jaydipsinh K. Dodiya

Department of English and CLS

Saurashtra University, Rajkot

Abstract

Modern Parsi fiction has emerged as a rich literary space for exploring questions of identity, belonging, and cultural survival, particularly within the context of diaspora. The Parsi community, a Zoroastrian minority originally from Persia, has faced demographic decline and cultural marginalization, themes often reflected in its literary productions. Contemporary Parsi writers, especially those writing in English, have used fiction as a means to interrogate and negotiate the complex interplay between tradition, modernity, and the experience of displacement. This paper examines the representation of identity and diaspora in modern Parsi fiction, focusing on how narrative strategies reflect the tension between rootedness in cultural heritage and the fluidity of globalized existence. By analyzing key literary works, especially from writers such as Rohinton Mistry and Bapsi Sidhwa, this study demonstrates how Parsi literature provides a nuanced lens on issues of cultural memory, fragmentation, and the search for continuity amid diasporic realities.

Keywords: *Parsi Literature, Diaspora, Identity, Cultural Memory, Postcolonial Fiction*

The Parsi community, though numerically small, occupies a significant position in the literary and cultural history of India. Having migrated from Persia to India around the eighth century to escape religious persecution, Parsis established themselves predominantly in western India, particularly in Bombay (now Mumbai). Their contributions to India's commercial, cultural, and intellectual life are considerable, but their fiction is particularly noteworthy for its introspective engagement with themes of identity and diaspora. As globalization has intensified patterns of migration and cultural hybridization, Parsi writers have increasingly turned to fiction to represent the dilemmas of belonging, loss, and negotiation inherent in diasporic existence. Modern Parsi fiction, predominantly written in English, frequently portrays the experience of simultaneously inhabiting multiple cultural worlds, with characters often suspended between

the traditions of their ancestral faith and the realities of modern, often Westernized, environments.

Identity in modern Parsi fiction is often portrayed as fractured or contested. This fracture emerges not only from geographical displacement but also from cultural and generational divides within the community itself. Rohinton Mistry's novels, particularly *Such a Long Journey* and *Family Matters*, provide powerful insights into the struggles of Parsi individuals trying to maintain their cultural identity in a rapidly changing Bombay. The protagonists in Mistry's works frequently embody the anxiety of cultural dissolution, particularly as younger generations show decreasing interest in preserving Zoroastrian rituals and customs. Nostalgia for a lost cultural cohesiveness permeates his narratives, yet this nostalgia is often tinged with irony, reflecting the impossibility of fully retrieving or preserving a cohesive identity in the face of modernity's relentless march. Mistry's portrayal of Bombay—a city crowded, chaotic, and increasingly indifferent to minority communities—serves as both a literal and symbolic space where Parsi identity is constantly under negotiation.

Diasporic consciousness in Parsi literature intensifies this sense of identity crisis. For Parsis who have migrated abroad, particularly to Western countries, the challenges of assimilation and cultural retention become even more acute. Bapsi Sidhwa, another leading voice in modern Parsi fiction, explores these tensions in works such as *An American Brat*. Her protagonist, Feroza, a young Parsi girl from Lahore, migrates to the United States, only to find herself caught between the liberal freedoms of American society and the conservative expectations of her Parsi family back home. The novel vividly dramatizes the emotional and cultural dissonance that characterizes diasporic life. Feroza's gradual embrace of American values, including her rejection of certain restrictive social norms, reflects the transformative impact of diaspora on personal identity. Yet this transformation is accompanied by a lingering sense of estrangement—not only from her family but also from a stable sense of self. The narrative underscores how diasporic identity is fundamentally hybrid, shaped by both attachment and alienation.

Cultural memory plays a central role in the construction of identity within these literary works. For diasporic Parsis, memory serves both as a source of belonging and as a burden. It connects characters to their ancestral past and religious heritage, yet simultaneously reminds them of the cultural erosion they witness in their present lives. The Parsi community's historical

narrative—marked by migration, adaptation, and survival—becomes a recurring motif in fiction. However, memory in these texts is rarely idealized. Instead, it is often fragmented, filtered through the subjective experiences of characters grappling with conflicting loyalties. This is evident in Mistry's *Tales from Firozsha Baag*, where characters navigate small, everyday conflicts that cumulatively reveal larger anxieties about communal survival and the fading of old certainties. These stories capture how the weight of cultural memory can foster both pride and a profound sense of melancholy, especially when set against the backdrop of an indifferent or hostile broader society.

Modern Parsi fiction also highlights generational conflicts as a key dimension of diasporic identity struggles. Older characters typically advocate for strict adherence to Parsi customs, religious observances, and endogamy, viewing such commitments as essential to the survival of the community. In contrast, younger characters often embrace hybrid identities, challenging rigid boundaries and seeking affiliations beyond traditional community structures. This generational divide is not portrayed simplistically as a clash between progress and conservatism but rather as a complex negotiation where both sides exhibit vulnerabilities, fears, and desires. Sidhwa's and Mistry's works frequently illustrate these tensions, capturing the psychological depth of characters who feel simultaneously pulled toward familial loyalty and personal freedom. This internal conflict deepens the sense of diaspora—not merely as geographical dislocation but as an emotional and psychological state of in-betweenness.

Language plays a significant role in representing identity in modern Parsi fiction. The very use of English by Parsi writers signals a certain form of diasporic consciousness, even for those writing within India. English serves as both a tool of global communication and a marker of cultural estrangement. While it allows Parsi writers to reach broader, often Western, audiences, it also distances them from the Gujarati or Persian linguistic traditions historically associated with the community. This linguistic choice often reflects the hybrid identity of the authors and their characters, who oscillate between cultural worlds. Dialogues in these novels often mix English with Gujarati phrases or references to Parsi religious terms, signaling an attempt to retain cultural specificity within a predominantly global linguistic framework. This interplay of languages mirrors the larger cultural negotiations at work in the lives of the characters.

In addition to individual identity crises, modern Parsi fiction frequently engages with collective anxieties about the future of the community. The declining population of Parsis, their diminishing presence in India's socio-political life, and fears of cultural extinction are recurrent themes. Writers often depict Parsis as a community under threat—not from external oppression, as in earlier historical periods, but from internal demographic decline and cultural assimilation. Mistry's portrayal of elderly Parsis grappling with loneliness and the erosion of communal bonds captures this existential threat. The sense of diaspora, therefore, is not confined to physical migration but extends metaphorically to a sense of cultural homelessness within their own ancestral land. The diaspora, in this broader sense, becomes both external and internal—a loss of cultural rootedness irrespective of physical location.

Despite the melancholic undertones in much modern Parsi fiction, these works also testify to the resilience and adaptability of Parsi identity. Characters frequently demonstrate agency in forging new identities that, while shaped by displacement and fragmentation, are not wholly defined by loss. Diaspora in these narratives is often represented as a space of possibility as much as one of alienation. Through education, travel, and cross-cultural friendships, Parsi characters redefine what it means to belong, embracing hybrid identities that reflect the complex realities of contemporary global life. Moreover, by writing these narratives in English and participating in global literary markets, Parsi authors themselves embody the creative potential of diasporic expression.

In conclusion, modern Parsi fiction provides a compelling exploration of identity and diaspora, articulating the intricate emotional, cultural, and psychological negotiations that define the Parsi experience in the modern world. Through the works of writers like Rohinton Mistry and Bapsi Sidhwani, these narratives reveal how identity is continually shaped by memory, cultural expectation, generational change, and the pressures of globalization. The diaspora in Parsi literature is both a geographical condition and a metaphorical state, reflecting a profound sense of cultural in-betweenness. These literary works serve not only as artistic expressions but also as vital cultural documents preserving the voices, anxieties, and aspirations of a community navigating the uncertain terrain of modernity and migration. By foregrounding both the struggles and the possibilities inherent in diasporic life, modern Parsi fiction enriches the broader field of postcolonial literature and deepens our understanding of cultural identity in a rapidly globalizing world.

Bibliography:

1. Kershaw, Angela. "Parsi Fiction and the Imagining of India's Minorities." *Postcolonial Text*, vol. 12, no. 1, 2017, pp. 1–15.
2. Mistry, Rohinton. *Such a Long Journey*. Vintage, 1991.
3. Mistry, Rohinton. *Family Matters*. Vintage, 2002.
4. Sidhwa, Bapsi. *An American Brat*. Milkweed Editions, 1993.
5. Sidhwa, Bapsi. *Ice-Candy-Man*. Penguin Books, 1988.
6. Tinker, Hugh. "The Parsees in India: Community in Decline?" *The Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 31, no. 2, 1972, pp. 365–376. Cambridge University Press.