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NERGIS DALAL'S SKIN DEEP: EVANGELIZING PARSI RELIGION WITH SPECIAL
INCLINATION TOWARDS ALTRUISM

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ABSTRACT

Religion, the most controversial word, the aplomb of humanity finds its meaning in the reverence of human being for God, in the eulogy of divinity, in the trust of the weak for help, in apprehension the substance that lies behind and in the belief that the bond between man and God is eternal. Religion is the perennial source of inspiration for life to human being. Literature, the resort of humanity to siphon off the emotions has been a ruse to reflect the religion. In fact literature found its genesis in religion as the morality, miracle plays the Bible all paved the way to the modern literature. The endeavour of literature to blow the lid off the true spirit of religion is worth extolment as no other entity is able to convey the same in this manner. Different hues become visible when the tenets and the ethos of the religion evinced in fiction. Myriad of writers very proudly eulogized their religion in their work and especially Parsi writers, steeped in the traditions of their religion incline to give minute details. Nergis Dalal, the mystified star of contemporary literature has shown Parsi religion in all its paraphernalia in her novel 'Skin Deep'. Parsi community becomes visualized in the concrete form as the ambience, taste, attitude all take shape in her words.

Key Words- Parsi, Religion, Community, Customs, Traditions

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Religion in its broad sense is the love for creator God of created man. The true asylum of humanity, religion penetrated in literature with its evolution. The religious tales and sermons watered the terra firma of literature and revamped it with new ethics. There is no religion in the world that has not been evinced in literature. The oversensitive writers while expressing the concealed feelings and emotions of mankind have spilled the beans of the tenets, the ethos and the spirit of their religion. Parsi writers, especially, with their proud feeling for their tiny community have very enthusiastically brought into light the sacraments and the ethos of the religion in their works. Writers as Keki.N.Daruwala, Rohinton mistry, Wapsi Sidhwa, Nergis Dalal, have corroborated the real spirit of Parsis. Not only the rituals, traditions, customs of Parsi but also the aura, the food the ambience of house has also been dealt with a fine tooth comb. Initiation into their work is to initiate in the Parsi philosophy and for a non parsi, an opportunity to dive deep into the depth of it. The novel *Skin Deep* by Nergis Dalal is made to be settling in Parsi religion. It is an endeavour of writer to show the whole

world that this cosmopolitan religion is a refuge of royal people whose inclination is towards altruism and who believe in the maxim "eat, drink and be merry" without harming anybody.

In Dalal's fiction we find Philosophy of religion as she has explored Parsi religion in her novel *Skin Deep*. She has shown the customs, traditions and rituals of it. She is a Parsi and her inclination to let the world know about this community finds expression in her novels and she gives every minute detail through the protagonist Naaz and grandma who are Parsi. Dalal has not only told about the religion but also is successful in presenting the ambience and aura of a Parsi house in the form of grandma's house.

The term *Pārsi*, Persian language is a demonym in Persian language meaning "inhabitant of Pārs" and hence "ethnic Persian". Parsi also spelled as Parsee, member of a group of followers in India of the Iranian prophet Zoroaster. The Parsis, whose name means "Persians", are descended from Persian Zoroastrians who immigrated to India to avoid religious persecution by the Muslims. According to the *Qissa-i-Sanjan*, Parsis migrated from Greater Iran to Sindh and Gujarat, where they were given refuge, between the 8th and 10th century CE to avoid persecution following the Arab conquest of Persia. Dalal seeks to delve into the history of the religion and makes Naaz vehicle for the same. Naaz tries to appease the inquisitive instincts of her Punjabi husband Ramesh who is mesmerized by the lavish and mysterious lifestyle that was so different from his own Punjabi religion. Naaz very vividly gives the idea of the migration of the people of her community and intermingling with Indian people.

"We are the original boat people. We arrived in India as refugees from Persia in AD 745 fleeing conversion by Islamic invaders. The story goes that the raja of Sanjan, where the refugees landed, was reluctant to admit these strangers from across the water. He said there was no room for them and sent the Parsi head priest a full glass of milk as a symbol. The priest put a pinch of sugar in the milk and returned it to the raja, intimating that they would assimilate totally and even sweeten the place with their presence.(P. 135)

No aspect that touches life of the members of this community has found an escape from description. She has spoken about the people, the vision of religion and the fanaticism of people for their own. The religion is rigid in the context of intermingling of other communities. As neither they are allowed to marry in other communities nor do they allow other communities to enter their fire temple or mingle with them. They do not allow any kind of conversion. This specific religion is very conscious for having its identity intact and for this reason it allows no conversion. They are very conscious of defilement of their religion. The grandmother in the novel accepts the foreigner wife for his son but couldn't prepare herself to allow her to participate in the typical religious customs and rites. She performs the rituals for the bride but evade her presence in the Navjote ceremony of her own twin daughters when the time comes. The people are so much steeped in their own sacraments and tradition that they are reluctant to mingle others even at the cost that their number is reducing. It is their religious fanaticism that makes them reticent. They are not ready to accept even converts and a pure Parsi infant born of the parsi parents only is allowed to perform the religious customs.

"Because the Parsi Zoroastrians in India refused to accept converts to their religion, their numbers were steadily diminishing. In a strongly patriarchal system, children of mixed marriages were only accepted into religion if their fathers were Parsis; in rigidly orthodox areas, even this concession was denied." (P.5 *Skin Deep*)

The followers of the religion are imbued in it and have their own ceremonies and tradition to be followed with all paraphernalia and acuity. People strictly believe in following the rituals. Grandma in the novel *Skin Deep* celebrates the ceremonies of Achoo Meecho and Navjote with honour. Her son JJ marries a foreigner. Although the bride was foreigner yet the grandma performs the rites of welcoming the bride with a gesture of blessing of the prosperous and flourishing married life.

"Grandma was waiting to do the achoo meecho ceremony to welcome the bride. A large silver tray was filled with symbols of good luck and prosperity- rice grains, sugar crystals, dried dates and rose water in a gulabus made of silver, reminders of our Persian heritage. (P. 7)

According to Jewish law, when Jewish boys become years old, they become accountable for their actions and become a bar mitzvah. A girl becomes a bat mitzvah at the age of twelve according to Orthodox and

Conservative Jews, and at the age of thirteen according to Reform Jews. Dalal introduces the readers with this tradition of the Parsi religion by describing the Navjote ceremony of Naaz and Yasmin.

“For Zoroastrians, this is like a First communion or Bar Mitzvah, a formal initiation which every Parsi child- male or female- must undergo. The sudra, a thin muslin shirt worn next to the skin, and the kustis, the sacred thread, handwoven from white lamb’s wool, are formally put on the child by a priest in a ceremony which had great religious significance for all Zoroastrians.” (P.53 Skin Deep)

Grandma prepares Naaz and Yasmin for the Navjote and with recitation of mantras the ceremony is performed. The ceremony is like the initiation of a child in the materialistic world of accountability. The ceremony is strictly restricted to the Parsi people only and a non Parsi is not allowed to attend it. Even the mother Sophie who does not belong to the religion remained away from the ceremony. They were ready for the Navjote and in a lavish ceremony with hundreds of guests the priests perform the ritual-

“The sudras were slipped over our heads as the shawls were removed and the kustis wound three times around our waists. It was only when everything was over that Sophie was allowed to approach us and help us dress in the new clothes that had been laid out in silver trays which also held grains of rice, coconut flowers, dried dates and silver mugs of water.

At the death of Grandma the last rituals are performed with the same reverence and ceremonies. The nasal tone of the mantras filled the atmosphere and the whole ambience was of sorrow. The nasellers are allowed to take the body to be disposed off.

For Parsis good behaviour is the most essential feature in human beings. Abstemious behaviour is not the mark of Zoroastrians. The religion is different from others as it does not require of man to be a recluse. The Zoroastrians love to eat drink and be merry. Grandma is the typical paradigm of the fondness for food of the Parsis. The culinary skills of the grandma many times snatches out Naaz of frustration and anguish while she is compared with her beautiful diva sister Yasmin. For Grandma to prepare food is an art and it requires a lot of dedication and perfection. To savour the taste of Nahari Grandma goes before daybreak with Naaz to the alley of Hyderabad.

“Nahari is a breakfast dish, eaten at dawn, just as the sun comes up over the minarets and the air still retains something of the night’s coolness...the pungently sharp flavours of the south mingling with the best of Mughal spices.”(P.68 Skin Deep)

Accumulation of wealth and helping others are the assay mark of every Parsi. They accumulate wealth to give charity as for them good behaviour is above all. Caring for the employees is also a unique feature of the Parsi business tycoons as they provide facilities like schools, hospitals etc besides providing convenient working conditions to them. They are bound in moral obligation to make the world better place to live. Naaz being a Parsi is steeped with all these tenets of good behaviour. That is why she helps her in-laws under all conditions and circumstances knowing the fact that they wanted a Punjabi bride for their son. Grandma also inculcated in Naaz all the sophistication of the religion. For them it is their duty to choose the right path to move on and fight against the deformity of every kind in the world as lies, disputes, disharmony, immorality and diseases. Fasting or eremitic behaviour is never welcomed as it does no good to anybody.

“They believe that the world is a battlefield between the forces of good and evil, and that man is called upon to fight for good. This is neither easy, nor indeed possible, if the world is abandoned.” (P. 82)

The protagonist is the best example of this kind of behaviour and Grandma also enjoys the life at its full. Not only in the matter of food but also in living style and clothes and accessories the choices are royal. The grandma is the connoisseur who chooses all the things with great perfection and acumen. The gifts for various occasions exhibit the majestic taste.

“Now grandma extracted from a small velvet pouch the pink Basra pearls- three long strings of perfectly matched huge pearls- lustrous and tinged with pink.”(P.29 Skin Deep) “This is jadeite, ‘Grandma said. ‘the more rare and expensive of the two varieties of jade...and today the price of good quality jadeite can be more than sapphires, rubies and even diamonds.” (P.78 Skin Deep)

The posh lifestyle of Parsis leaves no room for mediocrity. The interiors, the rooms, the tapestry all give the feeling of splendor and elegance. Room has been elaborated in the words-

“Although it was a small room it had been furnished to provide the maximum comfort. The bed, which took up half the room, was covered in striped raw silk, with lots of fat cushions in the same material. The lined curtains were dark green silk and there were two excellent kashmiri rugs on the floor....”(P.117)

The people belonging to this religion are calm. They believe in environment conservation and common good of all. They are of peaceful nature. Even after death also the religion assures to be harmless. Dalal favours the Parsi custom of disposing of corpses by throwing in the “Towers of Silence”. The dead are carried to the “Towers of Silence” and exposed to the vultures. The custom may be scary for the people but the plea for this is that there is no harm to environment. Even after death a person is able to feed the creatures and the trees are not cut for the sake of disposal of the dead body.

“Ecologically it is the best way to dispose of dead bodies. All over India, trees are disappearing to feed hundreds of thousands of funeral pyres. Burials use up land, which is scarce and valuable. This is clean quick and efficient.”(P. 57)

Parsi religion as is inspired by the feeling of welfare and good of all also possesses the best qualities as should be there in a religion. There is liberty of education to boys and girls both. Independence is given to all to choose their way of life.

“For girls living in India, the compulsion to get married was immense, although this was much less so in Parsi families, where girls were educated in the same way as boys. They studied and worked abroad, lived independently and held responsible positions.”(P. 138)

The impartial behaviour is also apparent in the demeanour of grandma when she leaves her legacy in the most prudent hands of her granddaughter instead of entrusting it to his only son

She has also depicted about the nature of Parsi people that they are very helpful and kindhearted. Being a Parsi she has not spared any chance to make her readers familiar of this religion. The religion although followed by handful of people retains its grandeur and rites and rituals in the same spirit as are other religions of the world. The rigidity to abstain from intermingling, instincts to live the life to its full, believe in philanthropy, unique way to dispose of the dead bodies and the inclination towards welfare of society and environment not only make the religion unique but also makes it detached. The writer has shown the curiosity of the people to know about the religion. She has made Ramesh the mouthpiece and presents the lively picture of this rarely found community.

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