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Shifting Identities in Contemporary Indian Society – A Study of Meher Pestonji's *Pervez*

Arijit Ghosh, M.A. Ph.D. Scholar



Meher Pestonji

***Pervez* – A Thought Provoking Work**

Meher Pestonji's novel, *Pervez* (2003), set in Mumbai is a thought-provoking work that focuses on contemporary issues in India at the same time providing details and insight into the Parsi lifestyle. The narrative follows the protagonist's labyrinthine path leading to her maturation

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as a political being. The protagonist Pervez is a young Parsi woman whose failed marriage to Fred, a Christian rock-band-music singer, through a series of events leads her to the activist movement in the time preceding the demolition of Babri Masjid. She finds herself in confrontation with her understanding of equity, justice, religion and secularism.

General Features of Pestonji's Works

Most of the works of Pestonji concentrate on the characters on the margin of society, and bring them to the center of her discourse.

Her first book, *Mixed Marriage and Other Parsi Stories*, a collection of short stories is filled with stories like 'The Verdict' - about a Parsi couple whose first child suffers from cerebral palsy. 'Riot' is another story which records the experience of a Parsi social worker who walks through an unfamiliar locale of Dharavi slum during the disturbed period of Bombay riots.

Her latest novel *Sadaak Chhaap* though, does not deal with Parsi life and identity, but it is about the street urchins of past Bombay and present Mumbai. It is a fictional account of a ten-year-old street urchin who finds an abandoned infant girl on the railway platform. To her the boy plays the role of a foster father. The dire situation of the street children is not a distant reality in Bombay and other cosmopolitan cities in contemporary India. In almost all the works of Pestonji we see the characters bogged down in some adverse conditions from which they aspire to come out.

Pervez

The novel opens as she parts from her husband Fred, never to return. The narrative then shifts us to Bombay when she returns to her home to stay with her brother Darius and sister-in-law Dhun. She finds herself out of place having spent eight years with Fred in Goa before their marriage fell apart. She has become accustomed to living in Goa and now misses it. After her marriage she has not only lost her parents in a car accident, but coming back to Bombay, she realizes that she has also lost her class. In the party given by her rich brother Darius, she soon finds herself out of place. One part of her is eager to make up for lost time, another terrified of

encountering new worlds. In eight years, she had changed. The city had changed. She has to forge new equations.



Recreating the Memories

Returning home after eight years Pervez recreates her memories from a distance. She wants to become independent as she says to Dhun, “I don’t want to buy things I can’t afford... I don’t want to become a burden on Darius.” At the same time, she is constantly recreating her childhood memories amidst the old furniture of the house, in a way measuring her own self.

A party is one of the most convenient strategies to introduce characters in the narrative. In the party along with Pervez we also meet a plethora of characters like Mona Desai, Kavita, Vasant Chawla, Dilip Kanitkar, Nandita Rajan, Farhad, Anaita, and Naina, many of them we will never meet more than once. Eight years back Pervez enjoyed party, but now in the crowd she feels alienated from it.

A Minority Discourse against Fundamentalism

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Pervez turns out to be a discourse of minority standing against fundamentalism and essentialism. Being a social construct, literature recreates the images of society that serve to be a valuable instrument facilitating comprehension and assuagement of fundamentalism. The novel as a minority discourse reveals itself as a resistance against essentialism of the dominant social order.

Pestonji - a Non-conformist Posture

As an author, Pestonji is a non-conformist freelance journalist, she was as an active participant in the campaign to change rape laws during the 1970s, in the struggle for housing rights of the slum dwellers, in the anti-communalism campaigns and in the reporting on the Sri Krishan Commission investigating the Bombay riots of 1992-1993.

In an interview to *Times of India* she calls herself “an accidental Parsi”; she says, “My perception as a journalist prevailed over any kind of loyalty to my community which I don’t have”. She might call herself an “accidental Parsi” but her world view is conditioned by her Parsi identity. (Times of India, 19 Sep, 1999 as cited in *Sawnet*)

The Female Protagonist Perez

In *Pervez*, the female protagonist having the same name as the title of the novel is immersed in her Parsi identity. She was born and brought up in an affluent Parsi setting, amidst conservative Parsi parents, growing within the Parsi culture and tradition. She was a rebel in the family even long before she had fallen in love with Fred, a Christian, Goan bandmaster. A much younger version of Pervez had influenced and instilled courage in her younger brother Darius to defy their parents’ dictate and choose the profession of his choice. However, when Pervez decides to break the news of her love affair to her parents, their immediate response was shock, anger, disgust and denial.

As a preventive measure, she is detained within the four walls of the house. At last, she manages to escape out of her confinement and elopes to marry Fred. Their settlement in Goa is easy. Pervez, even though she and Fred had not had a Christian wedding, is readily welcomed in Fred’s family. Her mother-in-law treats her with compassion more because she is above their

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station in life, rather than being conditioned by natural affection. Pervez has to unlearn and learn cultural practices. She even has to painstakingly learn to eat with her own hands instead of forks and spoon after she marries Fred. Within eight years, their married life slowly wanes away. With Pervez, Fred is continuously behaving with aggression and without feelings. He often makes fun of her Parsi identity and family branding them as rich folk. Finally, when all her efforts to make adjustments with Fred fail, Pervez leaves Goa for Mumbai, never to return.

Perez returns to Mumbai to her home, which she had believed she had left forever. She had recently heard about the death of her parents in a car accident. Yet she could not take part in their funeral. Now after eight long years when she faces Darius and his wife, she finds it difficult to identify herself with the new family setup. It is not only that the house without her parents has changed, her eight years of exile has changed her. She feels like a fish out of water. However, Pervez is economically independent. Her deceased parents have left her enough fortune to sustain her. Moreover, Darius is a very caring sibling.

Perez wants to start a new life. She is confused and does not know what she wants in her life. She decides to get educated and take up a teaching career. However, through repeated meeting with her friend Naina at Kalina sets in motion a chain of events in her life. There she meets Praba, a member of the Feminist Forum. There is Vandana, who wants to pose nude for a fashion magazine. There is Siddharth who is a staunch Marxist trying to de-class himself and working in the slum areas in pursuance of his desire to bring about a social change. In their company, she is exposed to a medley of ideas, ideology and views that constantly changes her perception and identity.

Contemporary Issues

The novel in a fictional plane records live history of contemporary India. She witnesses debates and discussions about sexual freedom, objectification of body and reproductive rights. Yet Pervez does not yield herself to the attraction of any ideology. She is straight forward in expressing her own views. When Pervez asks Naina to change her house and move into a better house, which of course she could afford, Naina replies that she has been trying to ‘de-class’

herself to identify with the common man in the class struggle. Pervez bluntly says, “This doesn’t make sense” (Pestonji 2003).

An Occasional Poet and Interest in Social Issues

During her tumultuous relationship with Freddie she occasionally turned into a poet and her poems provided a space for catharsis. Until we complete reading half the book, she is a listener. She listens and occasionally speaks but she always thinks. She learns about the much publicized Sahabanu case. Sahabanu went to the court in her seventies when her husband refused to pay alimony after divorcing her. As she follows the demolition of Babri Masjid at Ayodhya, Pervez slowly becomes politically aware. Miscreants create news one after another. Post-demolition of Babri Masjid had a backlash in the form of burning of a train at Godhara. The forest fire of communal violence soon spreads in Mumbai.

Changing Face of Dharavi Slum

The known contour of Dharavi slum, which Pervez frequents in her persuasion of social work, is fast changing. She is shocked by each new face of violence and mask of hypocrisy. All she could feel was the fire of hatred.

Munawar has utterly changed; from an adolescent slum boy he has turned into a conspirator and a murderous executioner. Navin Chawla, a capitalist, a business magnate makes use of the situation to his advantage. He sends goons to set the slums of Dharavi aflame in the façade of a riot so that he can build his resort; only much later this is discovered by Pervez. But yet there is hope and goodness still prevailing.

During the riot Pervez, a Parsi woman, with the help of a Christian family saves the life of a Muslim child. Majority of the people maintain their composure. People around her are fast changing.

Retaining Parsi Identity

Slowly but steadily throughout the narrative she identifies herself as part of the crowd of Mumbai, yet retaining her center at the edge of a Parsi identity. She maintains a fine balance Language in India www.languageinindia.com

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between her interior self and her external environment. She believes in equality, but cannot become an orthodox communist like Sidharth. She has no objection in Munawar coming to her apartment and having food, but she certainly feels disgusted when Munawar goes on to take bath in her bathroom and uses her towel. She cannot “de-class” herself at the cost of her personal hygiene.

Bombay Changed

Through the continuum of events ranging from demolition of Babri Masjid at Ayodhya to the riot in Mumbai, has matured the perceptions of Pervez. At the end of the novel the riot has subsumed, but Pervez feels that Mumbai has changed to a great deal. She yearns for the Bombay she grew up, but people have changed. She has been able to overcome her personal agony amidst the suffering of the people. Her identifying herself with the riot and violence-stricken Mumbai has vanquished the pangs of domestic violence and emotional traumas. At the end of the novel, she seems to have acquired stoicism as we see her praying:

“Log rorahehain... Shanti do...Khumbaya, my Lord... Shanti do...” she sang to the breeze, the crab, the seagull and whichever pigeons were listening. “People are crying my Lord... Shanti do... He Bhagwan, O Allaah, Shanti do...” (Pestonji318)

Prayer to God/Gods

She prays to Khumbaya, Allaah, and Bhagwan to bestow peace. Khumbaya is the Zoroastrian name for God – Pervez’s religious identity. With addressing Allah and Bhagwan she embarks on the journey to communal harmony. There is apparently no visible transcendental epiphany or discovery in Pervez, rather what she gains is knowledge and sensibility to identify with the sufferings of humanity at large.

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Arijit Ghosh, M.A in English and Comparative Literature, Ph.D. Scholar
Department of English
School of Humanities
Pondicherry University
Puducherry
India
arijit2net@gmail.com

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