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The New Parsi: A Study of Firdaus Kanga's *Trying to Grow*

Moncy Mathew

Assistant Professor and Research scholar
St. Joseph's College, Devagiri, Affiliated to University of Calicut.
Calicut
Kerala.

&

Dr. S Nagesh

Associate Professor and Head
St. Joseph's College, Devagiri, Affiliated to University of Calicut.
Kerala.

The Parsis rose to prominence during the colonial period under the patronage of the British. They became the most westernized and Anglicized community in India. But after independence the Parsis lost the privileges they had enjoyed under the British and they are trying to understand their new role and position in Post-independence India. Firdaus Kanga's novel *Trying to Grow* presents the struggle of the Parsis in Post-independence India. This article examines the response of the Parsi community to their lost glory and prominence in the Post-independence period from the perspective of a colonial elite which played the role of a middleman community under the British with reference to Firdaus Kanga's novel *Trying to Grow*.

Kanga was born in Bombay in 1960 in a westernized Parsi family. He was born with a disease known as brittle bone disease (Osteogenesis Imperfecta). Because of this disease he was forced to spend most of his childhood in an apartment in Bombay. His semi autobiographical novel *Trying to Grow* narrates the story of Darius, nicknamed Brit (which refers to both brittle bone and his Anglicised rearing). Darius suffers from brittle bone disease like Kanga and is confined to a wheel chair. "[. . .] the setting of the story is limited to a one square mile area of the city. Most of the action is interior . . ." (Hawley 118). The novel explores Darius' homosexual love for his friend Cyrus and his heterosexual love for Amy. His father Sam and mother Sera are dedicated to taking care of their invalid child even though both of them are very sad and disappointed to have a brittle boned child. His sister Dolly marries a Muslim and moves to America. Sam and Sera die in separate accidents leaving Brit to take care of himself. The novel is a bildungsroman that deals with the growth of an Anglicised Parsi boy with brittle bone disease. Kanga sketches the experience of being a thrice marginalized writer- as a Parsi, as a homo-sexual and as a physically challenged person.

The novel is not only the story of its central character but also of the Parsi community. The growth and prosperity of the Parsi culture is directly related to their contact with the western culture. The Parsis were a group of Persians that came and settled in India in the ninth century A D and led an agricultural life till the arrival of the Europeans to India. After the encounter with the Europeans in the sixteenth century they transformed themselves to an advanced urban community and embraced Western culture in order to fully exploit the advantages offered by the new circumstances. All aspects of Parsi life were transformed by Western influence, particularly by the English influence. Their initial encounter with the West came in the form of the assistance they provided to the Portuguese traders. Soon they became the trusted middlemen of the Dutch, the French and finally the British. The Parsis being free from the restrictions of the rigid Indian caste system could go to whichever

destination their destiny led them. They very quickly realized the benefits of embracing Western education and soon were reaping the benefits of the Western technological advancement. Their entrepreneurial skills found enough opportunities in the growing jute, cotton and steel industries. Under the benevolent patronage of the British they started trade with China, Hong Kong, Sri Lanka, and the Arab countries.

The Parsis rose to prominence during the colonial period because of their unique identity as a Persian Indian community. They were given special privileges by the British in order to advance their own interest. In order to get maximum benefits from the British the Parsis transformed themselves by accepting western life style and education and became a close toady of the British. But independence changed the fate of the Parsis. It is quite natural for the colonial elites (like the Parsis) to experience a transitional phase after the transfer of power from the colonial masters during which period there is a rapid reordering of ethnic hierarchies in the society. Every community repositions itself in the postcolonial period. The new social hierarchy constructs a new relationship between the existing ethnic groups in terms of dominant and minority ethnic groups with the former completely in charge of the destiny of the nation.

A Country like India with a history of colonialism has a complex social and administrative system which is hierarchised according to caste and ethnicity. As Chetan Bhatt rightly observes:

the complexities are further compounded in attempts to conceive of Indian histories, social formations, civil societies, polity, national, federal, and district state formations and Indian nationalism in the languages of 'ethnicity', 'majority', or 'minority'. The formation of the Indian nation state and much of the content of pre-and post-independence Indian politics, were partially the result of institutionally embedded, deeply politicized logics set in motion from the 1870s, and based on modernist enumerative reasoning, statistically defined population blocs, group calculus and an arithmetic (zero sum) conception of political and civil power dependent on ascribed and hermetic group identities (176).

The rise of the Parsis in India is part of the colonial project. Colonialism is a mode of long distance imperialism where the conquered population is mostly administered through the assistance of native chiefs who are the local elites. Such a group of local elites, wherever they exist, are given a share of the colonial spoil in exchange of their loyalty. They are created in countries where no such groups exist prior to the arrival of the colonial power. The local elites are to some extent encouraged to adopt the culture of the colonizer. These local elites in course of time become dominant ethnic groups in colonial societies because of their proximity to the colonizer and the material, social and political advantages this brings. These auxiliaries of the imperial regime that receive the patronage of the colonizer are normally demographic minorities, the loyalty of whom can be bought easily by the colonizer. Van Den Berghe stresses the fact that in colonial societies such dominant minorities are numerical minorities even though in liberal democracies such dominant ethnic groups are numerical majorities. After the shift in the political power centers during the withdrawal of the imperial administration from the colonies, the numerically dominant majorities take over the control of the state and rule according to the principles of liberal democracy. The numerical majority legitimizes its rule not by claiming political exclusivity, but by the tenets of liberal democracy, leaving no option for the erstwhile dominant minorities but to assimilate (Van Den Berghe).

Firdaus Kanga's novel *Trying to Grow* recollects a frequent theme of the Parsi novels, the lost glory of the community, with nostalgia, frustration, anger and humour. The story almost melodramatically sketches the 'fate of the colonial elite', to use a phrase from Tanya Luhrmann, in the post colonial world. The Parsi community rose to prominence making use of the favourable circumstances provided by colonial rule and became an elite community by the turn of the century. The complete transformation undergone by this community in order to prosper under the British, had reached ridiculous proportions by the time India achieved its Independence.

Elite Indians, of whom Parsis are only one (though remarkable) example, shaped their ideals and sensibilities and the ideals and sensibilities of their children upon the canons of English colonial culture: its literature, its sociability, its competitive athletics, its pianos and lace and fitted suits, but also its dismissal of their countrymen as effeminate, traditional, and lowly. (Tanya Luhrmann 9)

Much of the humour of the novel *Trying to Grow* directly derives from the comparative perspective of the novelist on the changes that have come about in Bombay and the ignorance of the Parsis of this change. There is an attempt, on the one hand, at capturing Parsi life during the years of the Raj and on the other, its total insignificance in the contemporary social scenario of India. He mocks the Parsis for being blissfully ignorant of the changes that took place in India after the departure of the British. "Jokes about colonial nostalgia are exceedingly common, as pictures of royalty, English objects, desire for things English; . . ." (Luhrmann 22).

The novel is set in Bombay, the city the community believes, was built by their forefathers. It is in this city that the community flourished and achieved its phenomenal prosperity albeit with the British patronage. After settling in Bombay the Parsis shed the rural agrarian life that they led in Gujarat and became a highly westernized and anglicized urban people. Bombay has a distinct British air. As Salman Rushdie in his popular essay "Imaginary Homelands" records

In common with many Bombay-raised middle class children of my generation, I grew up with an intimate knowledge of, and even sense of friendship with, a certain kind of England: a dream England composed of test Matches at Lord's presided over by the voice of John Arlott, at which Freddie Trueman bowled unceasingly and without success at Polly Umrigar; of Enid Blyton and Billy Bunter, in which we were even prepared to smile indulgently at portraits such as 'Hurree Jamset Ram Singh', 'the dusky nabob of Bhanipur' (18).

Cricket was as much a part of Bombay as its distinct British clubs and commerce. Parsis were the first Indian community to join the British in playing cricket and certainly dominated the game for a long time. "The reason behind this early patronage of cricket by the Parsis, an educated, prosperous and westernized community according to Mankasji Kavasji Patel, an early observer of Parsi cricket, was the desire of the newly emerging Parsi bourgeoisie to strengthen ties with the rulers" (outlookindia.com). Even Ramachandra Guha refers to the fascination of the Parsis for this sport. Mihir Gose also points out the cosmopolitan nature of Bombay, its Parsi population and cricket.

Mumbai's cricket team reflected the cosmopolitan nature of Mumbai society. The great Mumbai cricketer and captain was Polly Umrigar. Faroukh Engineer, another Parsee, kept wicket and one of Mumbai's leading players was Gulbhai Ramchand, a

Sindhi. Maharashtrians formed part of the team, but did not run it or control it (Bose 192).

It was not only cricket that fascinated the Parsis. They admired and imitated everything that was Western. Brit, the central character of Kanga's novel *Trying to Grow* (1990), who is addicted to Western music, contemptuously states that listening to Indian classical music makes him puke. The admiration for Western culture was very often accompanied by contempt for native traditions. In less than one hundred years since their arrival in Bombay they were undoubtedly the most anglicized community of India. Even though their imitation of the Western culture, lifestyle, education and language helped them get closer to the British and increased their prestige and economic status, it carried them away from the host society, the culture of which they internalized for more than seven centuries since their arrival in India.

The Parsi community of Kanga's generation grew up with an intimate knowledge of and admiration for English culture which forms the outer layer of the contemporary Parsi self, covering the deeper Zoroastrian and Hindu layers. Sera and Sam of *Trying to Grow* still live in an illusory past which is the case of many Parsis. It is only Brit who makes them feel every now and then the reality around them. Despite growing up with all the prejudices and illusions of the Parsis, Brit can see the hollowness of the Parsi glory. The community had once produced towering personalities like Jamsetjee Jejeebhoy, the first Indian to be knighted by the British and an inspiration and model for the succeeding generation of Parsis. But the 20th century is the age of dwarfs like Brit. The over westernized Parsi community finds it difficult to position itself in the second half of the 20th century and struggles to relocate itself in the contemporary Indian society. Brit knows that like himself, his own community is neither Western nor Indian enough to fit into either culture. Brit becomes the metaphor of his community's sickness and brittleness. He feels angry at how ill prepared his 'almost the same but not white' community was for the period after the transfer of power from the British. Kanga's story is not so much about the brittle boned Darius who never knows when he is going to break his next bone, but more about a community which suffers from a greater disease –the threat of extinction. In sympathizing with the painful existence of Brit the readers are sympathizing with the community itself. In Sam's apprehension that his son may not be able to compete with the young men bursting with energy, is the painful admission of the community's own handicaps in Postcolonial India, where they have to compete with the majority Hindus and Muslims for political and economic positions. Western culture and education had given them an identity and prominence that the Parsis find difficult to give up in the Post-Independence era. Everything around them has changed; the pomp and the glory of the Parsis during the British Raj has become a thing of the past. As Bhavna Kale points out "However, after independence, this ethno-religious minority experienced a major setback. What was once a community of adventurous businessmen, entrepreneurs, was gradually reduced largely to a community of job-seekers with a marked decline in their financial status" (161).

The Parsis of the present generation are finding it difficult to wake up to this decline in the social standing of the community. Kanga gets to the core of this Parsi problem through his central character, Brit Kotwal, whose western nickname hides his really humiliating Parsi self. Neither he nor his sister wants to be called by their Parsi names. Kanga's bitter self mockery pierces through the false façades of the community. The community's inability to come out of the illusory world is made fun of by the author and the Parsi struggle for a new identity is sympathetically described by the author. It is a common phenomenon with the minorities in a country to experience uncertainty and conflicts of identity during the phase

that follows a reordering of society and ethnic hierarchy. The ambiguity of their own identity and the necessity to conform to the new value system will eventually be resolved by successful ethnic groups. Marginalization of such minorities during transitional periods is marked by an internal reformation and an acceptance of new values without really coming to terms with them. Saul Bellow's comment, though made in a different context, may well summarize the Parsi predicament in the Post-Independence India: "The old forms of existence have worn out, so to speak, and the new ones have not yet appeared and people are prospecting as it were in the desert for new forms" (Cronin and Siegel 226) It could safely be said that the Post-Independence Parsis have identified themselves more closely with the Indians than their Pre-Independence anglophile forefathers: "With the end of British colonial rule, the identification of the Parsis with India has certainly increased, both politically and culturally" (Jacobson 50). They are trying to stress their Indian identity more often than before. Kanga does not directly discuss politics in his novels. Neither does he find it necessary to present the element of hostility of other Indian communities towards Parsis as a serious issue that threatens the existence of the Parsis in India. For him the decline and the decay is a disease within and it is closely related to an identity that the Parsis still showcase with great effort. He amplifies the problems from within.

Westernization assisted by western education, had reconfigured the identity of the Parsis at the root level. It was the blind belief in the continuance of the British rule in India that motivated them to adapt more and more to Western ways of living during the colonial period. The departure of the British happened at the wrong time for the Parsis. The fact that they were not ready for this departure is very evident in many of the conversations in Kanga's novel. The characters are to be constantly reminded, even though mockingly, that the British are no longer ruling India. In the following semi-serious discussion between Sera and Sam the former had to be told that the times have changed:

'We will bargain for our freedom with this', she declared. And who will dare deny the value of British Guineas?'

'Those days are gone, darling, said Father. No one cares for Britain any more'

'Such disloyalty,' sniffed Sera. If you'd only been a Boy Scout you wouldn't talk like that. I took an oath with the Guides which I intend to keep; an oath to King and country' (Kanga 11).

Even though the whole conversation takes place in a very light hearted mood, it does suggest the deep loyalty of the Parsis to the British rule and also their inability to come to terms with the Post British period. The influence of the West on Parsi family values, visible in phenomena like late marriages, preference for choosing their partners rather than traditional arranged marriage, nuclear families, etc, get exaggerated in the novel because of the focus on the family in the novel.

The British raj doesn't just exist as a golden period for the Parsis; it colors and shapes their present identity as well. Their daily life is so conditioned by English culture that they feel uncomfortable getting used to or even thinking about alternative life styles in the new postcolonial era as Sam finds out.

'That's one of my suits, dear. I'd never dream of going to the bank without one'.

'The days when you had to wear a suit to work are gone, Sam. The British left twenty five years ago'(Kanga 13).

Kanga's critical engagement with the ongoing Parsi project of decolonization renders humour and pathos to the novel. There is a sure attempt by the Parsis to introspect their identification with British culture and the ways in which they should overcome this proximity to the western culture that distances them from the Indians. While admitting the fact that the British have left India for sure, Brit is guilty of addiction to Western culture. Even a very casual glimpse at his everyday routine would indicate his dependence on a Western life style which reminds us of the life style of the Parsis during the colonial period. His disability has, to a great extent, curtailed his choices. His daily life is an extension of his parents' daily life. It is natural for Brit to grow up with some his community's stereotypes. Despite his spatial confinement he understands and criticizes community stereotypes that are out of tune with contemporary times.

The continued influences of the West hampered Parsi growth after independence. Their extraordinary expectations fail to get realized. Just like Sera and Sam –who take pride in comparing their robust physical features to Betty Gable and Gregory Peck –have to accept a son like Brit with arrested growth, the Parsis of the present generation have to accept the diminished stature of the community. The presence of the past has paralyzed the community's growth.

Identities are circumstantial, feeding on the opportunities presented by the changing times. But in some cases the transformation required from one established identity to another one, necessitated by a change in the socio, cultural and economic circumstances takes a long time. Dominant minorities like the Parsi community find it difficult to accept a new identity which gives them lesser role to play in society. Kanga's characters are situated within this ambit of transformation. The favourable conditions that created the present identity have suddenly disappeared and the shock experienced by the community has to come down to a manageable proportion to really enable the community to adapt to the new circumstances. There are a few factors that made this transition a difficult one. First of all, the present identity has placed them on the world map as one of the most prosperous communities and to lose this recognition on the global level is painful for the community. Secondly, reading the fiction by Parsi writers, one strongly feels that the Parsis were not expecting this decline in their status resulting from the departure of the British. It came so suddenly that even fifty years after Independence they are still finding it difficult to believe this hard truth. Third, their present identity was achieved by a modification of some of the important doctrines of the community, a reversal is almost impossible and the creation of a new one requires time. As Ashish Nandy point out:

This colonialism colonizes minds in addition to bodies and it releases forces within the colonized societies to alter their cultural priorities once for all. In the process, it helps generalize the concept of the modern West from a geographical and temporal entity to a psychological category. The West is now everywhere, within the West and outside; in structures and in minds (*The Intimate Enemy* 11).

Colonialism alters cultural practices of the community in such a way that the colonized struggle during the period after the departure of their colonizers to free themselves of these influences. In the contemporary world, where 'westernization', Nandy claims, has become a pejorative word, the Parsis are forced to begin a process that would rid them of the cultural stigma of being westernized. This process has begun for the Parsis and is moving towards the right destination. The bitter irony that marked their expressions about Indian communities is giving way to an acknowledgement of the inevitable reality of having to accept their relative insignificance in Independent India.

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