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## Rebellious Women in *Pervez*

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### **Abstract:**

*Pervez* is a novel written by Meher Pestonji, a self-confessed rebel and an activist writer. She makes use of her real life experiences for her literary works. Obviously, the writer's ideas are reflected in her realistic literary works. In her case one can say that the writer and her literary works are inseparable. She portrays many rebellious women in her first novel *Pervez*. This paper attempts to analyze and interpret the rebellious, defiant nature of many female characters represented in the novel. It also attempts to relate the ideas of these women to that of the writer.

**Keywords:** woman, rebel, defiant, character, love.

### **Introduction:**

*Pervez* is a novel in English written by Meher Pestonji, an Indian Parsi writer. It was first published in 2003. Meher Pestonji is an activist writer who has campaigned for a change in rape laws, housing rights for slum-dwellers, and a more sensitive understanding of street children and their special needs. Her other novel is *Sadak Chhaap* (2005). Her other literary works are: (1) *Mixed Marriage and Other Parsi Stories* (1999), a collection of short stories, and (2) *Piano for Sale*, a drama. She uses her experiences as a material for her literary works. Obviously, her literary works carry feministic perspective and *Pervez* is no exception to it.

The novel *Pervez*, which has been written from female viewpoint, represents four rebellious women: *Pervez*, her mother, Vandana, Naina.

### **Pervez: A Born Rebel:**

The protagonist of the novel *Pervez*, a young Parsi girl is one of the rebellious women represented in the novel. She is rebellious by birth. Her rebellious nature makes her fall in love with Fredrick Mendonca, a Christian youth who works as a drummer in a band named 'Four Aces'. They chance to meet each other in her friend Anjali's birthday party where his band is performing. *Pervez* has been dancing in the party to the pop songs in English and Hindi being played by the live band 'Four Aces'. Fredrick Mendonca, the drummer of the band is enamored by this beautiful girl who is dancing so beautifully. At the last music

break, he comes to her and introduces himself, and tells her that the first song after the break will be for her so she should not dance. What happens after it changes the life of Pervez permanently.

Looking unabashedly at her he began, “Moon river, wider than a mile, I’m crossing you in style some day ... O dream maker you heart breaker, wherever you’re going I’m going your way ...”

The deep baritone entered Pervez. Not just through her ears but through eyes, mouth, skin. She could feel it boring into her muscle, filling her body with raw expectation. She could not take her eyes off Fred. ... she sat the edge of the dance floor, mesmerized.

Her head remained in the clouds for a week. (29)

The above description of the state of Pervez during the singing of the song, devoted to her, by Fred and her state even many days after the party makes it clear that she has fallen in love with him. However, when she is about to forget him and the enchanting incident at Anjali’s birthday party, he shows up after three weeks at the college canteen and walks straight to her, chats with her for half an hour and invites her to a party the following day wherein his band is going to play. Pervez too is elated to meet the boy of her dreams again who has made her feel like a princess. After it she attends all the parties where Fred’s band plays. After the first two parties while dropping her at her home he kisses her in the lift of her building. However, ‘after only the third party’ he has sex with her. After this incident, they make love ‘at the oddest of places at every opportunity. In a cab, in parks, on rocks facing the sea’. (30)

All this shows the rebellious nature of Pervez. However, her parents no nothing of it. They do not mind her staying out late nights as they think that she is out every night with Farhad, a good Parsi youth whom they like, and wish him to marry their daughter. However, when one night Farhad calls their home asking for Pervez while she is out, they come to know that she is not out every night with Farhad, but someone else. They are shocked by the realization that their beloved daughter has so far kept it dark from them. They are in for greater shock when they come to know through Pervez that their beloved daughter was out late every night with a man who is not a Parsi, but a Goan Christian, and moreover a drummer in a band. After it they put certain restrictions on her. Pervez defiantly tells her parents that she is deeply and truly in love with Fred and wants him to be her life partner, and her parents should stop treating her like ‘a twelve-year old’. She implies that she is a modern woman who knows what is good and what is bad for her, and so should have the freedom to choose her life partner. However, her parents, like other Parsis of the old generation, are against Pervez’s relationship with Frederick mainly because he is not a Parsi. However, Pervez, being a rebellious woman, elopes with him to his native place in Goa and they marry there. She converts to Christianity to marry him as per the condition put by Frederick’s parents.

After hours of Fred shunting between her and his family group to which the parish priest had been summoned, the verdict was pronounced. She

would be accepted provided she got baptised and consented to a church wedding. When Fred assented on her behalf she did not protest. Though she knew that baptism meant giving up the religion of her birth and would seal the nail in her relationship with her parents, she realized she had already burnt the bridges. (37)

Thus she leaves her parents, her people, her religion, her city, all the comforts and luxuries provided to her by her beloved parents, nay everything to marry the man she loves and to live with him for the rest of her life. It all shows her rebellious nature. Unfortunately her rebellious nature does not bring her happiness. Instead, it brings her sorrow as her love marriage does not last long due to the liaisons of her husband Frederick with numerous other women. Two years after their marriage Pervez for the first time comes to know that Frederick has affair with some other woman. She is shocked by this realization. The writer describes her state at the time in the following words:

She sat huddled on the floor hugging her knees all night. Too shocked to cry or sleep. The foremost emotion indignation. Then the pain of betrayal. (47)

The next day Frederick begs her pardon for his liaison with other woman and promises 'to never stray again'. She forgives him as she truly loves him. However, he does not keep his promise; he does stray again and again, and every time he begs Pervez for forgiveness as if it his right.

Every few months would see a replay of that scene, Pervez' self-respect ebbing as her body hungered for what her mind began to abhor. Scars of each episode drew a wall between them. A wall whose cement hardened with each shower. (48)

When it becomes unbearable to continue to live with her unfaithful husband, she parts from him after eight years of their marriage and goes to live with her brother Darius's family in Mumbai. Darius and his wife Dhun welcome her wholeheartedly and do everything to keep her happy. What is more, Darius gives Pervez half their ancestral property as per the wish of their deceased parents. However, Pervez soon gets fed up with the comforts of life and goes to stay in a rented house at Kalina in Mumbai. Giving the reason of leaving the posh house of her brother she says that she left it because it was 'quite comfortable, but so dull', which also shows her rebellious nature. Rositta Joseph Valiyamattam in her book *The Urban Dilemma: Religion and Politics in the 1990s (Meher Pestonji's Pervez – A Novel and David Davidar's The Solitude of Emperors)* writes about the defiant, rebellious nature of Pervez in the following words:

The central figure of Meher Pestonji's *Pervez* is the bold and beautiful young woman Pervez. Born into an affluent Parsi family in Bombay, Pervez is sensitive and intelligent, with a kindness that transcends all boundaries. She defies her parents to marry for love into a poor Goan Christian family. Cheated by her husband, she divorces him and returns to her brother Darius in Bombay, where she is looked down upon by relatives. Here, at twenty nine,

Pervez the rebel begins life anew, for she no longer fits into the elite social circle of her brother. (111)

At Kalina she comes in contact with a Marxist group through her friend Naina. Pervez receives a letter from Fred in over two years after leaving his home in which he entreats her to return to his house. However, she is no fool to be beguiled into returning to him trusting the words of this wily man. She refuses to return to her husband's house; instead she decides to devote her remaining life to the betterment of less fortunate people.

Pervez sat holding the letter for a long time. Burning poems had exorcised heavy emotion. Time had healed wounds. Now new wounds blew into her heart. The memory of love in all its innocence. Nostalgia for loss of innocence. Pain at knowing innocence can never be restored. And enduring tenderness. (229)

Her rebelliousness and innocence in the past made her fall in love with Frederick blindly and marry him. Now her rebelliousness and experience makes her reject his proposal of returning to him; instead she has found meaning in a more worthy cause: service of the miserable people. Only a rebellious woman can take such decision which will leave everlasting impact on her life. She later criticizes her aunt Tehmina Bulsara and other people belonging to her own community living at Malcolm Baug in Jogeshwari, Mumbai for refusing a refuge to a riot-hit poor unfortunate Muslim family. She tries her best to bring back peace and communal harmony into the society affected by riots started due to the demolition of Babri Masjid. Another incident that shows the strength of this rebellious woman is her taking the revenge on Vasant Chawla for causing Darius, her gentleman brother, a huge loss and humiliation by breaking a contract with him. It is her rebellious nature that helps her have no qualms about consenting to have sex with Pawan. She has become friends with Pawan, a member of Sidharth's group through her childhood friend Naina. She has sex with him to satiate her physical need caused by her permanent separation from her husband. She consents to have sex with Pawan due to the hunger of her body as well as due to the fact that this relationship with Pawan will not bind her, unlike her relationship with her husband Frederick; she will be a free bird even if she sleeps with Pawan. This is the line of thinking of a rebellious woman.

Pervez does not believe in the discrimination based on caste, creed, religion, race, ethnicity, gender, etc. That is why she is greatly pained and enraged when Saeed refuses to take a Dalit youth named Vishal's blood for his brother Munawar despite he badly needs blood and Vishal's blood group matches that of Munawar. She has made friends with Vishal; pain has brought them together, albeit the causes of their pain are different. She is against all kinds of discrimination, fundamentalism, communalism and parochialism, be it from anybody, even from the people of her community. That is why she is livid with the people of her community living at Malcolm Baug for refusing shelter to a poor Muslim family at the time of riots and feels very sorry for the unfortunate family. She is pained to know that Indian Parsis wish ill to Muslims for driving their ancestors out of the erstwhile Persia and today's Iran. She fails to realize how the people belonging to her community can still harbor grudge

against Muslims today for something that happened over a thousand years ago. She wonders how can today's Indian Muslims be held responsible and blamed for what Arab Muslims did many centuries before. It proves that she is unlike most other Indian Parsis. Pervez's rebellious nature is revealed in many incidents that take place in the course of the novel. One such incident is when she gets angry with Sidharth for always occupying a cane chair that Pervez gifted her friend Naina on her thirtieth birthday. All these occurrences in Pervez's life prove the fact that she is a rebellious woman. She is rebellious by birth. Rebelliousness seems to be in her genes. She most probably got this trait from her mother as her mother too is an uncommon, rebellious woman.

It seems that to great extent Pervez, the heroine of the novel represents the author of the novel Meher Pestonji, a self-confessed rebel. There are numerous similarities between them. Pervez is like Meher Pestonji in terms of her rebelliousness, her stand against all kinds of discrimination, fundamentalism, communalism, parochialism, and her work for the betterment of the less fortunate people, etc. It is a well known fact that Pestonji, like Pervez in the novel, is an activist who has done a great work for slum-dwellers, street urchins, and many other down-and-outs. Therefore, it would not be wrong to say that Pervez, a rebellious woman is the mouthpiece of Meher Pestonji, a rebellious activist writer.

### **Pervez's Mother: An Uncommon Mother:**

Pervez's mother too is a rebellious woman. She is modern in her outlook. She is an uncommon mother. Most probably it is she who is responsible for the rebellious nature of her daughter Pervez for she inherited this trait in her character from her mother through her genes. The following conversation between Pervez and her mother throws light on the rebellious nature of her mother:

“Naina's mother feeds her baby brother from her own body,” Pervez remembered saying.

“And loses her figure in the process,” laughed her mother. “See how plump she is? Breast-feeding is old fashioned. Powder milk has nutrients added to natural milk”. ...

“So you never gave me milk from your body?”

“I'd have been sagging like a cow if I had.” (219)

Unlike Naina's mother or, for that matter, many other mothers of the time, Pervez's mother never breast-fed her or her brother. Unlike other women, she 'rarely entered the kitchen except when preparing for a party'. (219) She, unlike other Indian mothers, never gave bath to her children when they were babies; it was done by maids. Therefore, it would not be wrong to say that Pervez's mother is a rebellious woman from whom the protagonist of the novel inherits the trait of rebelliousness in her character.

### **Vandana: A Rebellious Model:**

Vandana aka Vandy is the most rebellious woman in the novel. She has come to Mumbai from a small village in a northern India to earn name, fame and money as a top model in showbiz in this dream city. She is in live-in-relationship with Pawan, a fashion photographer. She is a very practical girl; she has strong will to make a career in the field of fashion and achieve huge success in it by fair or foul means. Therefore, she wants 'to be photographed in the nude' for a calendar. She asks Pawan to take her nude photograph, but he refuses to do it. He and his friends argue that every man who sees the calendar will mentally undress her upon which Vandy retorts: "Men who are like that do even without calendar" (45). She even goes to the extent of stating that Prabha and other girls, friends of Pawan who are against her posing nude for calendar, would have themselves posed nude for a calendar or a magazine if they had got beautiful bodies. She even deserts Pawan when she realizes that he will be of no help in the realization of her dream. About her once Naina remarked:

*She's not interested in anything but herself. She wouldn't have anything to do with Pawan if he didn't make a pin-up goddess of her. She wants money, fame, success. Pawan is her means for achieving these." (94)*

Naina's observation of Vandy's nature and her doubt turn to be true when Vandana leaves Pawan for once and all, in order to concentrate on her career and achieve success in it. All this goes to prove that Vandana is the most rebellious woman delineated in the novel.

### **Naina: A Woman Who Discards Luxuries for Love:**

Pervez's childhood friend Naina too is a rebellious woman. She was born and brought up in an affluent family. However, she falls in love with an activist Sidharth who is under the influence of Marxist ideology. In her own words, 'Sidhu is an exceptional person. Being his partner is a privilege'. (19) Obviously she leaves all the comforts and luxuries of her parental home and goes to live in a two-room flat at Kalina. Though Sidharth, whom she fondly calls Sidhu, cannot fulfill all her needs let alone providing her comforts and luxuries, she is happy with him. He is her world. When Pervez wonders as to how can Naina who enjoyed luxuries all these years provided to her by her loving parents can live without them with Sidharth, She says, "Comfort and discomfort are states of mind. I wouldn't change my life with Sidharth for anything in the world." (19) It shows how much she loves her Sidhu. In fact, she, who is a working woman, mainly runs her family. With Sidharth and other friends she is working to uplift the poor. In short, Naina is a rebellious woman who has given up all the luxuries of her parental home to live with the young man she loves and who is working to empower the powerless.

### **Conclusion:**

Thus Pervez, her mother, Vandana and Naina are rebellious women delineated in *Pervez*, a novel by Meher Pestonji, a self-confessed rebel and an activist writer. They give more importance to their personal happiness than what the world thinks of them. They defy the set patterns of social norms to find happiness and meaning in the life. Through their

rebellious nature they try to assert the uniqueness, individuality and equality of woman in the patriarchal society. To put it in a nutshell, it is obvious that Meher Pestonji who herself is a self-confessed rebel and an activist writer portrays so many rebellious women in a single novel i.e. *Pervez*. Therefore, it would not be wrong to say that not only Pervez, the protagonist of the novel, but also all the rebellious women delineated in it represent some aspect(s) of the personality of the rebellious author.

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