

Tradition and Modernity: Reconstructing Parsi Ethnic Identity in Indian English Fiction

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Abstract

The Parsi community, a small yet influential Zoroastrian minority in India, occupies a distinctive position in the nation's socio-cultural and literary history. Indian English fiction has played a crucial role in documenting, preserving, and reimagining Parsi ethnic identity amid the tensions between tradition and modernity. This paper examines how Parsi identity is reconstructed in selected Indian English novels, focusing primarily on works by Rohinton Mistry, Bapsi Sidhwa, and Firdaus Kanga. Through close textual analysis of *Such a Long Journey*, *Family Matters*, *Ice-Candy-Man* (published in the U.S. as *Cracking India*), and *Trying to Grow*, the paper explores themes of memory, community, diaspora, generational conflict, and the negotiation of religious and cultural continuity. The study argues that Indian English fiction reconstructs Parsi ethnic identity as a dynamic, self-reflexive, and hybrid formation shaped by both fidelity to Zoroastrian traditions and engagement with modern Indian and global realities.

Introduction

The Parsis, descendants of Zoroastrian refugees who migrated from Persia to India between the 8th and 10th centuries, have historically maintained a delicate balance between assimilation and cultural preservation. Concentrated primarily in Bombay (Mumbai) and Gujarat, the community has contributed significantly to India's industrial, philanthropic, and cultural development. Yet demographic decline, intermarriage debates, and globalization have intensified concerns over identity preservation.

Indian English fiction has emerged as a powerful medium through which Parsi writers articulate these anxieties and aspirations. In the postcolonial context, literature becomes a site where ethnic identity is not merely reflected but actively reconstructed. The negotiation between inherited tradition and modern consciousness is central to this reconstruction.

This paper investigates how Indian English fiction represents and reshapes Parsi ethnic identity, asking:

- How do Parsi writers portray tradition in relation to modernity?
- In what ways is ethnic identity threatened, transformed, or revitalized?
- How does narrative form itself participate in reconstructing identity?

Literature Review

Yusuf Bhat (2022) explores the theme of psychological and cultural displacement within Rohinton Mistry's novel *Family Matters*, focusing specifically on how these elements reflect broader anxieties within the Parsi community. Bhat argues that the novel captures a nuanced portrayal of displacement—not merely in a geographical or physical sense, but as an emotional and identity-based phenomenon affecting aging Parsis in a rapidly changing urban landscape. Through the character of Nariman Vakeel, Yusuf Bhat identifies deep-seated concerns surrounding generational disconnect, cultural erosion, and social invisibility. He suggests that the novel's depiction of fragmented familial bonds and the marginalization of the elderly symbolizes the collective unease felt by a community grappling with existential decline. Bhat's study contributes to South Asian literary discourse by situating *Family Matters* as a key text in understanding how fiction articulates the intersection of displacement, cultural anxiety, and identity politics in minority literature, particularly within the context of Parsi representation.

Swati Chabra (2007) analyzes how Bapsi Sidhwa's literary works contribute to the feminist reinterpretation of ethnic identity within the Parsi community. Chabra argues that Sidhwa's female protagonists challenge patriarchal and communal boundaries by redefining what it

means to belong to an ethnic minority, especially in the context of South Asian societies. Through novels such as *Cracking India* and *An American Brat*, Swati Chabra illustrates how Sidhwa presents Parsi women as agents of change who resist cultural prescriptions while negotiating their gender and ethnic affiliations. The article emphasizes that Sidhwa does not merely depict oppression but also celebrates resilience, autonomy, and the nuanced complexities of hybrid identities. Chabra's critical lens positions Sidhwa's work as a key example of how feminist discourse can intersect with ethnic narratives to produce a reimagined sense of community that accommodates dissent and transformation. Ultimately, Chabra's study contributes to the growing body of literature that explores the intersections of feminism, ethnicity, and minority representation in South Asian fiction.

Farah Chughtai (2018) delves into the portrayal of cultural disintegration within Rohinton Mistry's acclaimed novel *The Crow Eaters*. Chughtai argues that the novel vividly captures the internal conflicts and fragmentation experienced by the Parsi community as it grapples with modernity and changing social dynamics. Through an in-depth analysis, Farah Chughtai how Mistry uses family dynamics, tradition, and generational differences to depict the gradual erosion of communal cohesion and identity. The study emphasizes that *The Crow Eaters* presents cultural fragmentation not simply as loss, but also as a complex process of adaptation and negotiation. Chughtai's work contributes to a broader understanding of how Parsi literature reflects the tensions between preserving heritage and responding to contemporary challenges, illuminating the nuanced ways in which identity is reconstructed amid cultural flux.

Tara Dhingra (2006) delves into the intricate themes of identity formation, collective memory, and displacement as portrayed in Bapsi Sidhwa's novel *Ice Candy Man*. Dhingra argues that the novel poignantly captures the Parsi community's experience amid the tumultuous backdrop of Partition, highlighting the complex negotiations of belonging and alienation faced by minority groups. Through detailed textual analysis, Tara Dhingra shows how memory and migration intertwine to shape individual and communal identities, emphasizing the trauma and resilience embedded within the narrative. The study reveals that *Ice Candy Man* not only documents historical upheavals but also interrogates the ways in which Parsi identity is reconstructed through the processes of remembering and migrating. Dhingra's work significantly contributes to scholarship on postcolonial literature and minority representation by foregrounding the nuanced intersection of personal and collective histories within Parsi fiction.

Hina Fakhri (2017) explores how Rohinton Mistry's novel *Family Matters* encapsulates the transmission of trauma and memory within the Parsi community. Fakhri argues that the narrative foregrounds the psychological and emotional burdens carried across generations, especially as they relate to cultural displacement, aging, and familial responsibility. Through her analysis, Hina Fakhri illustrates how the domestic space in Mistry's novel becomes a site where cultural memory is preserved and contested. She emphasizes how the portrayal of elder characters, particularly Nariman, symbolizes the broader struggles of a community grappling with its declining demographic and shifting social relevance. Fakhri's contribution sheds light on how English fiction can be a potent vehicle for examining the layered experiences of minority communities like the Parsis, and how literature reflects the deep imprint of intergenerational trauma on cultural identity and social cohesion.

Historical and Cultural Context of Parsi Identity

The Parsi community traces its origins to Zoroastrian migrants who fled Persia between the eighth and tenth centuries to escape religious persecution. According to the traditional narrative recorded in the *Qissa-i-Sanja*, they sought refuge in western India and promised to integrate peacefully into local society while preserving their faith. Over time, the Parsis adopted Gujarati language and many regional customs, yet maintained distinct religious practices rooted in Zoroastrianism—particularly reverence for fire temples, ritual purity, and initiation ceremonies

such as the navjote. During British colonial rule, Parsis became one of the earliest Indian communities to embrace Western education, commerce, and industrial enterprise. Their involvement in trade, law, philanthropy, and industry positioned them as intermediaries between colonial authorities and Indian society. This early engagement with modernity shaped a cosmopolitan identity—urban, English-educated, and reform-oriented—especially in Bombay (now Mumbai), which became the cultural and economic center of Parsi life.

Migration and Settlement

According to community legend recorded in the Qissa-i-Sanjan, Zoroastrians fled Islamic conquest in Persia and sought refuge in western India. Their promise to “blend like sugar in milk” symbolizes both integration and distinction. Over centuries, Parsis adopted Gujarati language and many Indian customs while preserving Zoroastrian religious practices.

Religion and Ritual

Zoroastrianism centers on the worship of Ahura Mazda, fire temples, and doctrines of purity. Ritual practices such as the navjote initiation ceremony and the controversial dokhmenashini (exposure of the dead in Towers of Silence) have become identity markers. In fiction, these rituals often symbolize continuity under threat.

Colonial Modernity

Under British rule, Parsis became early beneficiaries of Western education and commercial enterprise. Their embrace of English language and liberal values positioned them as intermediaries between colonial rulers and Indian society. This early modernization complicates their postcolonial identity, situating them as both insiders and outsiders.

Theoretical Framework: Ethnicity, Hybridity, and Modernity

This study draws upon theories of ethnicity as socially constructed and performative rather than fixed. Ethnic identity is not static but continually rearticulated through narrative, memory, and representation. The Parsi case exemplifies hybridity: a community that is simultaneously Persian in origin, Indian in belonging, and global in outlook.

Modernity, here, does not simply denote Westernization but refers to processes of urbanization, individualism, secularization, and globalization that challenge communal bonds. Fiction becomes a space where these pressures are dramatized and negotiated.

Rohinton Mistry: Memory, Community, and Urban Modernity

The fiction of Rohinton Mistry offers one of the most detailed literary reconstructions of Parsi life in late twentieth-century India. Through novels such as *Such a Long Journey* and *Family Matters*, Mistry portrays the Parsi community as deeply rooted in memory, sustained by intimate domestic bonds, and challenged by the pressures of urban modernity. His work captures the textures of everyday life—ritual practices, family conversations, neighborhood gossip, and moral dilemmas—thereby transforming fiction into a cultural archive.

Memory plays a central role in Mistry’s reconstruction of identity. His characters often look backward to stabilize themselves amid political corruption, economic uncertainty, and social change. In *Such a Long Journey*, Gustad Noble’s attachment to religious rituals and ancestral values provides emotional grounding in the midst of national turbulence. Similarly, in *Family Matters*, recollections of earlier Bombay—more cohesive, less crowded—serve as reminders of a shrinking communal space. Through these acts of remembrance, Mistry suggests that memory is not nostalgic escapism but a means of preserving cultural continuity.

Community, particularly within the Parsi chawl or apartment complex, functions as both refuge and constraint. Mistry depicts tightly knit neighborhoods where collective identity is reinforced through shared routines and mutual support. Yet he also reveals internal tensions—over marriage, generational expectations, and social status—that complicate the image of harmony. The community is protective but not immune to fragmentation.

Such a Long Journey

Set in 1971 Bombay during the Indo-Pak war, *Such a Long Journey* centers on Gustad Noble,

a middle-class Parsi bank clerk. The novel situates Parsi identity within national political turmoil. Gustad's adherence to ritual and his reverence for ancestral memory contrast with his son's rejection of communal expectations.

Mistry portrays the Parsi chawl as a microcosm of ethnic solidarity, yet also reveals fissures within. The decline of Bombay's cosmopolitanism parallels the shrinking Parsi population. Tradition appears fragile but not obsolete; it offers emotional anchorage in unstable times.

Family Matters

In *Family Matters*, Mistry explores aging, illness, and familial duty through Nariman Vakeel, whose inter-religious love affair earlier in life disrupts communal norms. The novel interrogates endogamy, a key pillar of Parsi survival. Nariman's punishment—forced marriage within the community—reveals how tradition can become oppressive.

However, Mistry avoids romanticizing modernity. The younger generation's pragmatism often masks moral indifference. Identity emerges as negotiated rather than inherited. The family apartment becomes a symbolic space where generational tensions enact the broader crisis of ethnic continuity.

Bapsi Sidhwa: Partition and Gendered Identity

Ice-Candy-Man / Cracking India

Though set in Lahore during Partition, Sidhwa's novel foregrounds Parsi neutrality amid Hindu-Muslim violence. The child narrator Lenny observes how the small Parsi community attempts to remain politically detached. This strategic neutrality underscores their minority vulnerability.

Sidhwa reconstructs Parsi identity as cosmopolitan and mediatory, yet not immune to complicity. The novel highlights how modern nationalisms fracture older pluralistic bonds. Gender plays a crucial role: women's bodies become battlegrounds of communal honor, challenging any simplistic notion of Parsi liberalism.

Tradition in Sidhwa's work is less ritualistic than ethical—embodying tolerance, humor, and adaptability. Modernity, represented by nationalist fervor, threatens these values.

Firdaus Kanga: Disability, Sexuality, and Selfhood

Trying to Grow

Kanga's semi-autobiographical novel introduces Brit Kotwal, a disabled Parsi boy navigating adolescence. Here, modernity intersects with sexuality and bodily difference. The novel challenges conservative sexual mores within the Parsi community.

Kanga reconstructs ethnic identity from a marginal perspective—disabled, queer, and rebellious. By centering a protagonist who defies normative masculinity, Kanga expands the boundaries of what constitutes "authentic" Parsi identity.

Tradition appears both nurturing and restrictive. The humor and eccentricity of Bombay Parsis are celebrated, yet communal insularity is critiqued. Identity becomes an evolving narrative rather than a rigid inheritance.

Key Themes in the Reconstruction of Parsi Identity

Decline and Demographic Anxiety

All three writers acknowledge demographic decline as existential threat. Fiction becomes archival—preserving speech patterns, rituals, and everyday life. Literature thus functions as cultural memory.

Urban Space: Bombay as Cultural Crucible

Bombay (Mumbai) is more than backdrop; it is central to identity. As the city modernizes and communal politics intensify, Parsis feel increasingly marginalized. Urban decay mirrors communal erosion.

Generational Conflict

Generational conflict in the fiction of Rohinton Mistry, Bapsi Sidhwa, and Firdaus Kanga highlights the tension between tradition and modernity within the Parsi community. Older

characters often uphold religious rituals, endogamy, and communal discipline, viewing them as essential for cultural survival, especially in novels like *Family Matters* and *Such a Long Journey*. In contrast, younger characters seek personal autonomy in matters of marriage, career, and identity, as seen in *Trying to Grow* and *Ice-Candy-Man* (also published as *Cracking India*). However, the novels complicate this binary by showing that both generations struggle with belonging—elders fear cultural extinction, while the youth fear restriction. Ultimately, generational conflict becomes a space of negotiation where Parsi identity is not abandoned but reinterpreted and reshaped.

Hybridity and Cosmopolitanism

Hybridity and cosmopolitanism are central to the representation of Parsi identity in the works of Rohinton Mistry, Bapsi Sidhwa, and Firdaus Kanga. Historically Persian in origin, culturally shaped by Gujarati traditions, influenced by British colonial education, and rooted in Indian urban life, the Parsis embody a layered and hybrid identity. In novels such as *Such a Long Journey*, *Family Matters*, *Ice-Candy-Man* (also published as *Cracking India*), and *Trying to Grow*, this hybridity is reflected in language, customs, and worldview. The community is portrayed as cosmopolitan—urban, multilingual, and socially adaptive—yet conscious of its minority status. Rather than signaling loss of authenticity, hybridity becomes a source of resilience, enabling Parsis to navigate multiple cultural spheres while maintaining a distinct ethnic identity.

Humor and Irony

Humor and irony play a vital role in shaping Parsi identity in the works of Rohinton Mistry, Bapsi Sidhwa, and Firdaus Kanga. In novels such as *Such a Long Journey*, *Family Matters*, *Ice-Candy-Man* (also published as *Cracking India*), and *Trying to Grow*, humor functions as a cultural signature—marked by wit, self-deprecation, and affectionate satire. Irony allows the authors to critique communal rigidity, political corruption, and social hypocrisy without abandoning empathy for their characters. Through comic dialogue, eccentric personalities, and understated narrative irony, these writers transform vulnerability into resilience. Humor thus becomes a survival strategy, enabling the Parsi community to confront demographic decline, marginalization, and internal contradictions while preserving dignity and cultural distinctiveness.

Tradition versus Modernity: Conflict or Continuum?

Rather than depicting tradition and modernity as oppositional, these novels reveal their interdependence. Tradition adapts; modernity absorbs cultural residues. The reconstruction of identity occurs through selective preservation—rituals reinterpreted, values renegotiated.

For example:

- Endogamy is questioned but communal belonging remains valued.
- Religious rituals coexist with secular education.
- English language becomes vehicle for preserving ethnic specificity.

Thus, modern Indian English fiction itself embodies hybridity—an English medium narrating minority Indian experience shaped by Persian roots.

Narrative Strategies and Identity Formation

The narrative form contributes significantly to identity reconstruction:

- **Memory-based narration** preserves communal history.
- **Child narrators** (as in Sidhwa) offer innocent yet incisive critique.
- **Domestic realism** foregrounds everyday practices as identity markers.
- **Autobiographical elements** blur fact and fiction, reinforcing authenticity.

Language plays a key role. Gujarati-inflected English, Parsi idioms, and code-switching assert cultural distinctiveness within global readership.

Conclusion

The reconstruction of Parsi ethnic identity in Indian English fiction reveals a community

engaged in sustained dialogue with its past while negotiating the pressures of modernity, nationalism, diaspora, and demographic uncertainty. Through the works of Rohinton Mistry, Bapsi Sidhwa, and Firdaus Kanga, Parsi identity emerges not as a static inheritance but as an evolving cultural formation shaped by memory, urban experience, generational tension, and self-reflexive critique.

Across novels such as *Such a Long Journey*, *Family Matters*, *Ice-Candy-Man* (also published as *Cracking India*), and *Trying to Grow*, tradition is neither romanticized nor dismissed. Instead, it is interrogated, adapted, and reinterpreted within the frameworks of contemporary Indian and global realities. Rituals, endogamy, domestic practices, linguistic particularities, and communal humor serve as symbolic anchors of continuity. Yet these anchors are continually tested by urban displacement, political turbulence, intergenerational disagreements, and shifting moral sensibilities.

One of the central findings of this study is that Parsi identity in fiction operates through negotiation rather than opposition. Tradition and modernity are not binary forces but interdependent processes. Mistry's *Bombay* is a city where ancestral memory coexists with postcolonial uncertainty. Sidhwa's *Partition* narrative reveals minority neutrality as both survival strategy and ethical dilemma. Kanga's autobiographical fiction destabilizes normative constructions of masculinity, sexuality, and communal belonging. Together, these writers expand the boundaries of what it means to be Parsi in late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century contexts.

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