



RELIGIOUS CONFLICTS IN FARRUKH DHONDY'S BOMBAY DUCK: A CRITICAL STUDY

Dr. R. NAGA DHANA LAKSHMI
M.A., PGCTE., PGDTE., M.Phil., Ph.D
Associate Professor in English
K L University, Green Fields,
Vaddeswaram, A.P., INDIA. Pin
code: 522 502.

Dr.R.BAKYARAJ
M.A., M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D
Assistant Professor in English
K L University, Vaddeswaram,
Guntur, Andhra Pradesh, India –
522502

Abstract

Farrukh Dhondy, an expatriate Parsee novelist, offers two dense and energetic narratives in Bombay Duck which address the painfully current issue of religious fundamentalism. The other motif in the novel is an expatriate's quest for roots. Divided into two parts, the novel has Gerald Blossom as the protagonist in the part and Xerxes in the second. If the first narrative concentrates on Sanskriti in all its ramifications, the second is a vehement expression of the Angst and alienation of Xerxes who is the centre of consciousness. Set in a white milieu, Dhondy's novel celebrates the bi-cultural identify of the young Asians in Britain and moves between the two worlds of Bombay and London. A tragic undercurrent pervades this multi-dimensional narrative. It is a novel of belongingness of the breaking down of cultural barriers. Dhondy questions the negative in life which is the cause of intellectual alienation and cultural vacuum.

Key words:- Alienation, Consciousness, Intellectual, Ramification, Vehement, Painfully.

Introduction: The first narrative in Bombay Duck provides a near factual, detached and unsentimental portrayal of the multiculturalism of England. Immigration and the psychological consequences are frankly narrated and partly dramatized in the second narrative. Dhondy's purposeful contrast between the Indians in Bombay and the Asians in England assumes significance. The Ramayana provides the setting for the multiculturalism in the narrative.

Quest for the Ideal Man: David Stream, a shrew British director of plays discovers a new international metaphor in the Ramayana. The epic of India tantalizes him as it incorporates the quest for the ideal man. Stream's discovery of the smallness of European past and the richness and complexity of Indian life are part of Dhondy's subversive strategy. To borrow the words of Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, Dhondy's narrative challenges the worldview that can polarize the centre and periphery. Dhondy's, at the same time, is sarcastic in depicting the indifference of Indians to their own cultural past for which the Ramayana stands. Like some postcolonial novelists, Dhondy employs irony to project the apathy of Indians towards their own cultural treasure whereas foreigners like David Stream are „discovering“ India. Aliens like David Stream, in their enthusiasm, however, fail to avoid the pitfall of perceiving Indian culture through their manners.

In this narrative, Dhondy resorts to the ironic mode in individualizing the principal of characters. Ali, a black Muslim of west Indian origin, Plays the role of Sri Rama whereas Anajli, a mediocre Indian actress, is Sita. Kojin, a Chinese, plays Lakshman. The real life of these stands in sharp contrast to the roles they play. If Ali is a sexually frustrated man, Anjali



is a thoroughly westernized woman who enjoys watching nude paintings. She does not believe in anything that Sita, the ideal woman in India symbolizes. Ali's wife, on the other hand, deserts him for another man. Thus, both are far from being able to imbibe the Indian sensibility.

True Humanism: The Ramayana is essentially a story of the conflict between God and Evil. David, a foreigner, fails to adopt it as it is an „intellectual“ thing strongly knit in the Indian milieu. He regards himself as the ultimate authority on dramaturgy. His motive is to arouse the Indian conscience. But the lack of sincerity and intellectual dishonesty of aliens like Stream results in the degeneration of values. Dhondy's aim is to highlight man's insensitivity to the real culture that elevates. He rejects institutionalism as it adversely affects human nature and acquires an illusion of cultural instead of reality. The first narrative in Bombay Duck thus preaches true humanism.

Cultural Conflict: According to Dhondy, in love for each other lies hope and salvation for the world infested with fundamentalism. For an individual like Ali, it provides an opportunity to question himself ceaselessly arrive at answers. As in the Christian mythological tradition, Indian culture also attaches paramount importance to the quest of the one half of the other half as typified in the concept ardhanareshwara. Complications arise when this way of life is corrupted for narrow or ulterior ends. The quest for the other half by Ali and Anjali is construed as a „civilizational insult“. Their innocent discovery of each other's sexual charms through the night before the performance of the Ramayana is an „affront“ to the moral code of India. Dhondy builds up the atmosphere of initial euphoria and subsequent communal violence without ever becoming subjective. If Ali is knifed, Anjali is attacked by an angry mob. The tragic death of Anjali is an eye-opener for Ali and Stream. Anjali in Bombay Duck is drawn in contrast to Feroza in an American Brat. If Feroza's alienation is psychological Anjali's culture, which results out of westernization. An upper-class Indian, who lives in Paris, Anjali is an alien to Hindu ethos, though ironically, she is a Hindu herself. The Ramayana fascinates her.

Her expatriate past haunts her. Thoroughly westernized, and culturally far removed, Anjali remains an alien to her own culture. Her quest is radically different from Feroza's; it is an intense search for an alternative to westernized life which is characterized by Ennui. Feroza, on the other hand, survives since her revival of interest in ethnicity resolves her dilemma in the new world. But in Anjali's case, the divorce between her Hindu culture and the westernized life brings about the ultimate catastrophe. In Feroza, there is a fruitful reconciliation between ethnicity when she preserves and the glittering materialistic life of the new world.

The second narrative in Bombay Duck reveals Farrukh Dhondy's unconcealed and frank dislike for Zoroastrianism. This offers a sharp contrast to the other expatriate writers under study. Xerxes acts as Dhondy's narrative consciousness. His growth, if there is any, is negative and anti-heroic. He is an uprooted man in history as a Parsee, and also an exile always struggling to put down his roots somewhere. Here, his own journeying mind acts as the cultural metaphor of displacement of Asians in general, and Indians and Pakistanis.



Xerxes narration is nearly objective and of documentary type. Dhondy's utter disgust with contemporary India is narrated in its unmitigated disdain.

Xerxes is an agnostic who comes under the influence of Boman Virji, a rebellious Parsee. It is he who proselytises Xerxes against the shallow customs and the shameful barbarism of the Zoroastrian religion. His „deism“ fires Xerxes imagination in whose fertile mind seeds of socialism are sown very early in life. His words prove prophetic. Religious fundamentalism raises its ugly head and consequently, disintegration sets in. The brutal death of Anjali in racial violence is a symbolic act; it is suggestive of the loss of culture. Boman, who advocates deism and rejects the shallow doctrines of his own religion, embraces Christianity in America. His prosperity in America is what he denounces at home.

Xerxes is a marginal man whose quest is for roots. If life at home is bleak, poverty and hunger stare at him in the west. He realizes, like a typical exile, that „roots are deep „. Ironically his search for roots in Bombay where most Parsees live is an exercise in futility. Dhondy, though a Parsee, is not a devout Zoroastrian. However, he does not favour anarchism. Xerxes too rejects Zoroastrianism, which is an institutional religion, at least in his view, for it does not provide a key to the existential dilemma confronting him. Xerxes views Zoroastrianism with indifference. Ironically his garbled view on Zoroastrianism and his essays interpreting Zoroastrian legends and myths fascinate the west. Dhondy, unlike other Parsee novelists, attaches no importance to the central doctrine in Zoroastrianism, that is, the conflict between God and Evil. Xerxes, his protagonist, too rejects the concept of duality in human nature. He contends that Evils weighs as much as Good. His triumph as a Parsee historian lies in his ingenious use of his own religion which provides him with opportunities of livelihood.

Xerxes deliberate controversial stance as an interpreter is an existential imperative. It is a desperate attempt to acquire an identity of his own. According to him, Buddhism is in love with death. Gautama was in love with perfect and ultimate oblivion. He was not seeking an answer to life. On the contrary, he was looking for perfect and ultimate death. The kind of deaths we know and are terrified of in imperfection, are only states of being which brings us back through rebirth. So, the ultimate is to seek a way of annihilation.

Contrast Perception: Bombay Duck presents a purposeful study in contrast. Xerxes, the son of Cyrus, was a legendary figure who expanded his empire from Persepolis to Africa. His name is given to many a boy in the Parsee community. It is truly ironic that Xerxes, unlike his legendary namesake, fails to acquire some social space for himself. If the legendary Xerxes is a conqueror, Dhondy's protagonist is a misfit, a loner without roots, and inevitably, a loser. Equally ironic is the way Xerxes acquires an identity of his own as Parsee historian in the west. He is even regarded as an authority on fundamentalism. As a Parsee, he believes that there is no atmosphere of insecurity or danger to the existence of Parsees in India. This view is in striking contrast to the apprehensions of Gustad in such a long journey and Zareen in an American Brat.



Zoroastrianism: Farrukh Dhondy raises the issue of conversion to Zoroastrianism. This is an issue on which the Parsee community is divided today. Xerxes is a radical Parsee who advocates conversions to Zoroastrian faith. His experience at a meeting in India strengthens his conviction. In his lecture at Bombay, an erudite Dastur speaks in favour conversions. He argues that the Zoroastrian reluctance to allow conversions is a product of bigotry and racism. This brought about a self-protective instinct in the Parsee community. He observes in a provocative tone that Parsees should know their religion. Any one can be a Zoroastrian because it is a matter of belief. For his part, he would „divorce“ the Fire temple, the religious practices, the Towers of silence and all restricted places from the racial question. Roshan Ribbon Walla, a Parsee girl whom he is expected to marry, too holds a similar view. The unjust treatment meted out to the bastard children of Parsee father, bred by contact with servant classes, is a telling comment on the current state of affairs in the Zoroastrian community, though there is a rule in the Parsee community that children of Parsee fathers are Parsees.

In Xerxes theories about Zoroastrianism, there is neither intellectual honesty nor profundity, although he attains recognition as a scholar both at home and in the West. He is an intellectual who even establishes, however cleverly, that the Egyptians got their religion from the Zoroastrians and Mithraism is, in fact, at the root of Christianity. Thus it is interesting to note he carves out a niche for himself in the British society as a leading authority on Zoroastrian history, religion and culture. Like Tristan Elliott in Saros Cowajee's suffer little children, Xerxes believes that lovelessness is a malady the victims of which are innocent children. If Tristan goes mad and is sent to a lunatic asylum ultimately, Xerxes is arrested in Britain. Bombay Duck has some of the characteristics of post-modernist fiction. A typical post-modernist protagonist is hopelessly sick and is unsure whether he has a self of his own to speak about Xerxes is a mere „role player „with no Forsterian „roundness“ about him.

Collation with Other Works: Bombay Duck invites comparison with the novels of Bharathi Mukherjee who faced rejection in Canada but found her roots in America. In wife and Jasmine, her handling of Diaspora is astute. Deeply indebted to Malamud whose protagonists are mostly from proletariat, Bharathi Mukherjee's protagonists Tara, Dimple and Jasmine are women who belong to the professional class. Tara's predicament, like Xerxes is that of divided self suspended between worlds and rooted in neither. On the other hand, Dimple's self is „aborted“ before it ever takes a concrete shape in the world of reality. In Mukherjee's novels, as in Sidhwa's An American Brat, there is a celebration of America as the land of freedom and opportunity. This preoccupation constitutes the mainspring of the diasporal dream cherished by her protagonists, Tara, Dimple and Jasmine where as Dhondy's Xerxes, like Anita Desai's Baumgartner, is a rootless vagrant.

In the second narrative, the Zoroastrian worldview serves as the operative principle. Though a non-conformist, who rejects institutionalism and ritualism, Xerxes outlook is typically Zoroastrian. He scoffs at the shallow doctrines and outdated notions of Zoroastrianism, but subscribes to the central doctrine of Zoroastrianism. However, in his



case, the shadow falls between thought and action. What he accomplishes is precisely what Zoroastrianism condemns. He takes the path of Druj and reaps the consequences. His distorted truths and misinterpretations of Zoroastrian legends and myths provide a surrogate identity. He writes without conviction and argues without faith. It is an activity in which his true self is not involved. Writing, instead of becoming an instrument of moral discovery, remains a mere means of livelihood.

Conclusion: Boman Desai's narrative does not romanticise the past, nor does it remain bound to nostalgia. Homi's journey into the racial memory serves to put the past in perspective and to redefine his own existence in the present. "Memory" becomes a timeless device narrative strand. Here, quite significantly, the memo scan is sufficiently humanized. To this extent, what is dreary tempered with values. The memory of Elephants, like India Ganesan's, the journey suggest that history is determined to a great extent by „recollections“. Here, as in Indira Ganesan's work, memory is fragmentary and subjective. The narrative technique of Boman Desai has far reaching implications. It is a recurrent synthesis of the supposed „history“ and the Timeless memory. Desai's use of „memory“ as a means of intense self-discovery has several „human“ consequences. Unlike Rushdie's olfactory sensory trap-door into the racial past, Boman Desai employs memory per se as a creative endeavour to merge into the Timeless. Here the myth and metaphor of memo scan perform a „human“ function. It is a dream realized, as much as a fact, drawn from the Timeless history of the racial unconscious. The realization of Homi that the collective unconscious is not „realm of the dead“ alone but includes the living as well is experiential. Thus Boman Desai achieves a singular effect of unifying the individual self in the Timeless medium of memory. For once, the technique revivifies the theme and this is perhaps the greatest achievement of Boman Desai is a historian with a difference; he perceives the entire Zoroastrian history through a single human consciousness. This is the artistic achievement.

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