

CRUCIBLE OF CULTURAL ENCOUNTERS Paradigms of Conflict in Selected Parsi and Anglo-Indian English Novels of the 1980s

Sonia Chacko♦

Abstract: This paper examines how the problem of cultural hybridity in the Indian context is explored by the Parsi and Anglo-Indian English novelists of the 1980s. It is found that in the absence of dialogue, understanding and acceptance of cross-cultural differences, conflicts and disharmony prevail for the minorities, both in India and abroad, where they are in diaspora. Holding a mirror up to their unique communities, these writers enter into a dialogue with the readers too, inspiring them to revise some of the long-held notions about these people who were hitherto seen as the 'other' and call for their integration into mainstream society, while retaining their special flavour.

Keywords: Acculturation, Anglophilia, Conflict, Dialogue, Diaspora, Hybridity, Identity, Integration

1. Introduction

The minority cultures and their survival in the Indian subcontinent is an issue taken up by the writers of the Parsi diaspora with the concomitant sense of loss, nostalgia and the inter-cultural conflicts engendered by extra-territorial loyalties, which finds a corresponding equivalent in the Anglo-Indian dilemma. Minorities have a special relationship with the society that surrounds them: they are simultaneously insiders and outsiders. This position gives them a third space, which adds depth and flexibility to their experience of life. Minority culture incorporates dialogue, mobility, bilingualism (multilingualism), trans-cultural encounters and multiple cultural identities; it

♦**Dr Sonia Chacko** is Assistant Professor of English at Union Christian College, Aluva, since 2006. Her areas of interest include Indian Writing in English, Culture Studies, Women's Studies, Media Studies, etc.

transcends the binary opposition of 'here' and 'there', 'familiar' and 'foreign', 'ours' and 'theirs', and it creates a 'third space'. It is a permanently mobile relationship, a relationship of negotiation; a hybrid field.

The heterogeneous multiplicity of Indian society and culture account for the layered plurality, multiplicity of textual voices and open-endedness found in Indian novels in English written in the 1980s. Boman Desai's *The Memory of Elephants*¹ is a realistic presentation of three generations of Parsis, told through the perspective of Homi, who invents a memoscan to preserve the memory of his American girlfriend who jilted him. The machine accidentally slips into the protagonist's Collective Unconscious, the repository of not only personal memories, but the familial, ancestral and universal memory of humankind, the title being a metaphor for long term memory. Firdaus Kanga's *Trying to Grow*² traces the travails of a cripple coming to terms with his self-alienation that parallels his Parsi community's efforts at social integration through dialogue. The definition of self in a colonial culture, the freedom and fear of being foreign, inside and outside of one's own culture – these are some of the issues explored by the authors.

Allan Sealy's *The Trotter-Nama*³ is an epic or a fictional chronicle that tells the story of seven generations of an Anglo-Indian family and their tragic plight of their own making. Anglo-Indianness has never been determined by blood, but rather by the sense of identity. Begging to be accepted as white, they minimised or even denied their Indianness and, thus, came to be despised by Indians, while the whites treated them with contempt.

Indian culture seems to be constructed around the proliferation of differences. "Heteroglossia – the different discourses and tongues contained within the normative framework of the novelistic language – is shown to be emblematic of the civilizational system of social, religious, linguistic

¹Boman Desai, *The Memory of Elephants*, London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1988.

²Firdaus Kanga, *Trying to Grow*, Delhi: Ravi Dayal, 1990.

³Allan I. Sealy, *The Trotter-Nama*, London: Viking, 1988.

differences that constitutes [...] India"⁴ The subcontinent has different communities, castes and subcastes, all looking for a space for themselves. The man-milieu contrast and the agony of not being accepted, owing to differences in religious faith, caste, community, colour, language – all contribute to the deep chasms separating one individual from another.

The novelists explore the complex network of relationships between different segments of people with a distinctive dialectic of absence and presence, passivity and revolt, relationships threatened and crumbling. The method of pointing and counterpointing details the difficulties, uncertainties, suspicions and unresolved doubts. The novels focus on the puzzling pattern of inconsistencies and ambiguities, hidden agendas and ulterior motives that mark the socio-cultural life of Indian society.

Individuals experience alienation of three types – cultural, social and self-alienation. The first two often overlap and get blended, and even compounded. Being estranged from others due to cultural differences or social mores is a problem caused by an ethnic group's inability or inadequacy to adjust itself to the milieu. The Parsi community is a monumental example of cultural alienation, having inadvertently cut itself away from the mainstream cultures of India. Though part of Indian society, they simultaneously maintain or develop their own distinct customs and traditions and, thus, a separate ethnic identity. This, in turn, gives the community a rather peculiar standing: they are Indian in terms of national affiliation, and history, but not typically so in terms of ethnicity, cultural behaviour and religious practices. The community lives more in the British past, with psychological loyalty to that culture. If at all circumstances force them to adopt Hindu ways, for practical reasons, it is done with a sense of guilt.

2. The Parsi Predilections

Among Indian writers in diaspora, the case of Parsi writers is the most problematic. Other Indian expatriate writers like Salman

⁴Neelam Srivastava, "Fictions of Nationhood in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*," *Journal of Contemporary Thought*, Summer 1999: 59-70, 68.

Rushdie, Vikram Seth, and Amitav Ghosh are part of the postcolonial phenomenon of the 'Empire writing back.' The Parsis, however, were in diaspora even in precolonial and colonial India. They have been through many diasporas. Firstly, as descendants of the Zoroastrians who fled Iran around 850 AD to avoid possible conversion to Islam by the conquering Arabs, and later in the colonial India they enjoyed special privileges and elite status, whereas, in postcolonial India, they find themselves in a psychological diaspora amidst a large majority community on the one hand, and a conglomerate of many minorities on the other. These conflicting socio-cultural demands and the downgraded status in the decolonized subcontinent have made several Parsis start their newest diaspora oriented towards the United Kingdom and North America.

Boman Desai's *The Memory of Elephants* has significant episodes of intercultural conflicts. Spurned by his first love, Homi Seervai, the Parsi genius from Bombay, creates a machine that lets him scan his brain for memories of the time he spent with her. The machine malfunctions, propelling him instead into his collective unconscious where he encounters ancestors and relatives, both dead and alive. Homi, blessed with the memory of elephants, discovers the splendour of his Parsi heritage. The novel addresses the question of Parsi identity and Parsi diasporas. In camera-like movements, it zooms from the Iranian past to the Indian urban present, then back to the pre-colonial Indian period, the colonial years, to the American migration and finally comes to a conclusion in Bombay. But, distanced as he is from his milieu, the protagonist fails to move across his ethnic separateness and the tenaciously preserved monotheistic religion.

Homi is often confronted with the clash between his Parsi identity and the Indian identity. As a schoolboy, he is always teased by other boys who call him 'bawaji', a constant reminder of his 'otherness' as a Parsi. His mother's westernized family typifies the westward-looking Parsis, distanced from the Indian reality. His mother's contact with the mainstream Indian society is restricted to the men and women who work as servants in their home. Bapaiji, his paternal grandmother, on the other hand,

is more integrated into her Indian context, just as she is more rooted in her Parsi identity. The westernization of the Parsis during the colonial rule has complicated their process of acculturation in India. Till the advent of the British, they had almost succeeded in maintaining equilibrium between their Parsi and Indian identities. The irony is that history and race matter very little to the modern Parsis like Homi, who thinks that their Americanized life is also an important part of their history which is still in the making. Homi, the archetypal bawaji, is nostalgic as he no longer knows where his 'home' is. The anguish of an exile is reflected in his innocent but profound query: "Home? Where? Aquihana or Bombay?" (22)

One of the significant images in the novel is Jalbhai Phirozshah Cama, the great-grandfather of Homi, whose revelation brings relief to Homi's fractured self and clears the debris in his mind. Speaking of his ennobling experience at Jerusalem, Cama says:

Christianity became relevant to me as a variation on the theme of Zoroastrianism; each of them was profound by itself, but their conjunction provided a breadth which neither possessed alone; the many religions of the world reveal the world in all its variety like the variations of a theme. Heaven is not a place as Bapaiji, Granny and your papa have imagined, creating it to suit their own needs, but a state of mind which encompasses all these possibilities (144).

Homi realises the importance of his great grandfather's proclamation only after his traumatic experience. After proposing marriage to his American fiancée, Julie, Homi is bewildered by her statement: "We must get you baptized as soon as possible." Homi says: "Baptized? Why? What do you mean?" Julie's response makes him more confused: "You know what I mean. You are not a Christian. You have not taken Jesus into your heart". Homi says: "Why would that make a difference?" "Why? Well, I couldn't marry a heathen." "I'm not a heathen. If you thought that why didn't you say something before?" Their arguments go on like this, with occasional flare-ups. Finally, Homi tells Julie: "I'm sorry. I cannot do it" (282).

Cama's view that Zoroastrianism and Christianity could complement each other hastens the process of Homi's self-knowledge. He argues that it would not be good to embrace Christianity and his outlook is reflected in his musings:

I was a Zoroastrian, but not as devout as I might have been because I did not wish to close myself off to what other religions had to offer. That was why I had attended all the celebrations. In Hinduism, the Buddha was the ninth avatar of Vishnu, Jesus, the tenth. I liked that. Gandhi had conducted prayer meetings for Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, Jains whoever chose to attend. I liked that. It did not make me a heathen (307).

In matters of religion and faith, Parsis have maintained a distance from others, though with due respect. Homi's dialogue with the racial past holds the key to his existential dilemma. After wandering through time and space, Homi is back where the roots of most Parsis exist – India. His fragmentary existence ends with his resolve to lead a fuller and more meaningful life.

Most Parsis today are closer to Rusi, Homi's younger brother, who is enchanted with all things western. The exalted self of the Parsi during the British rule did not get its much-coveted place in England in the 80s. America and Canada are the new El Dorado for such Parsis. But both Homi and Rusi experience difficulties in being accepted by the White American society and face the ethnic anxiety caused by racial discrimination.

Rusi goes to the United States for higher studies. There, at the door of his room in Chicago University, he finds a girl sticking a sign, "Rusi Seervai is a Scab!" "Send Him Back Where He Came From! J. S." (261-262). Rusi confronts her and wants to know why she considers him a scab. She replies, "Because you take jobs from people who need them" (262). Rusi has replaced white students washing dishes in the cafeteria for a dollar an hour. The prejudice against the brown-skinned Indian Rusi is hardly concealed. "The encounter had shaken him because he did not wish to offend anyone. He felt more vulnerable in Chicago than in Bombay" (262). On being asked, his roommate Tim explains the meaning of the word scab: "It is a word, like cat or dog. You

can't help it if you are a scab" (262). The socio-cultural tensions are found to be of a racist nature in the United States and Rusi happens to be its victim. Cross-cultural problems are as much palpable and real in Chicago as in Bombay, where he is teased in school as a stupid 'bawaji' for being a Parsi.

The cultural distance between the Parsi family in the novel and the Indian society parallels the trans-cultural encounter in Chicago. As Mrs Seervai says:

I'm afraid [...] that I was something of a Marie Antoinette [...]. We were in Calcutta at the time of Mr. Jinnah's Direct Action Day; your Dad went to work with an armed escort; I could even hear the wails of the dying, but I lived in such a self-absorbed world that what happened outside seemed to have nothing to do with me (216).

The Parsi apathy to the cause of India's freedom and the psychological vacuum that surrounds them are indicative of their social isolation and cultural alienation which, for them, is a kind of insulation against social contamination. From the postcolonial perspective, this frustrating situation is bound to happen when people have extraterritorial loyalties rather than loyalties to the society they belong to. The absence of dialogue between communities has been at the heart of communal tensions in India, right from the Partition to the present day.

The Memory of Elephants presents two distinct types of colonial Parsis – the Nationalist Parsi and the Anglophile Parsi. Homi's Bapaiji, his father's mother, is an example of the former, symbolic of the pact that the early Parsis had made with Jadav Rana, the king of Sanjan, who had given refuge to that first band of Zoroastrians. She lives in rural Gujarat, dresses in a saree, speaks Gujarati, eats the Parsi version of Indian food and that too with her fingers. Bapaiji represents the hybridized Parsi self evolved through the integration mode of acculturation into the Indian multi-cultural milieu, through dialogue with non-Parsi communities during the pre-colonial phase in Indian diaspora. Homi's mother is the enchanted-by-everything-English Parsi distanced from the Indian reality. After the end of the Raj, she and other Parsis like her, go into a psychological diaspora. She

raises her sons on a diet of English language movies, Pop music and comics. She encourages them to go to Western universities. As a result, Homi and his brother Rusi go into yet another diaspora – the Western one.

Rusi, through his Jewish girlfriend Jan, is assimilated into the American mainstream, when they get married and settle there, religion is not an issue; but Homi is rejected by America and has to return to India. The symbolic action of the novel is, thus, resolved into distinct realities. The India-based Parsi, in spite of increasing intolerance of minorities and 'otherness' in India, decides that for the time being at least, the country of refuge is home. The West-bound Parsi puts down roots in his new land, ceases to be an expatriate and becomes an immigrant. What Desai seems to convey is that the Parsis in the western diaspora have distanced themselves from their Indian roots, but need to return to them to recover their cultural identity. In the globalized present of the diaspora community, such cultural recoveries become means of survival.

In *The Memory of Elephants*, the cultural predilections and attitudinal differences frequently surface, as at the swearing-in ceremony of the first Governor after Independence:

Everyone was set for the oath-taking ceremony – but Mr. Pakvasa, the first Indian Governor-to-be was late. An unheard-of occurrence during the British Raj. Finally, some sadhus wearing dhotis and smeared with saffron from the waist up, took their places on stage and performed puja, preparing the way for Mr. Pakvasa, who made his appearance shortly in a kurta, dhoti and Nehru Cap (217).

The narrator, Homi, finds this Indian style unacceptable and even absurd: "To you this might seem commonplace, but to us, accustomed to the British ways, this had all the magnificence of a comic strip" (217). But then he returned to India!

The Anglophiles among the Parsis successively fail to adopt Indian ways and therefore look to the West for models. Living physically in India, and psychologically in England, many of these persons have the strains of a double life. As Bapaiji says of Adi, Homi's father:

Your Papa ... you know how much he loved the U.K. – well, here he dresses as if he had never left, as if he were always going to the 'the-A-tah', with his top hat and tails, twirling his stick as if he were an Englishman... And if he's not twirling his stick he's skipping around in his kilt playing bagpipes (31).

He belongs to a community that has shut itself in a water-tight compartment and, thus, estranged itself from the social and cultural ethos by living in the British past with psychological allegiance to British culture. All these point to the need for dialogue in effecting the assimilation into the society where they happen to find themselves, be it India, United States, or England.

Parsi novelists like Rohinton Mistry and Farrukh Dhondy exhibit a consciousness of their community in such a way that the community emerges as a protagonist, though on the surface their works employ characters as vehicles to exteriorize fears and disillusionments, anxieties and aspirations of their community. By centralizing the community in their narratives they reserve and protect themselves, employing psychological crutches.

Parsi writing displays the characteristic diasporic features like sense of loss, nostalgia and problems of identity in the host country. Their discourses detail the ambivalent feelings that they have towards their land of adoption. The ethno-religious aspects of Parsi life remain unexplored by mainstream writers who often tend to suppress these differences of ethnicity, which is an almost pejorative term for those who think in terms of post-nationalism and the global order.

The Tower of Silence, where the dead bodies of Parsis are exposed to vultures is a bone of social contention in Bombay. Zoroastrians feed their dead to eaters of carrion because they consider earth, fire and water to be too sacred to be polluted by putrefied flesh. But, the non-Parsis living around the Tower are naturally unhappy about it. "Complaints continue to mount against the presence of the Tower when some of the less than considerate vultures litter the balconies of Mr. Kumar, Mr. Kapur or Mr. Srinivasan, with disembodied fingers, ears, and other such appendages" (227).

The Parsi writers' anxiety to belong is not really to the place of their origin but to their cultural and religious traditions. Though the collective unconscious searches roots in the past history and culture, it is the present that needs to be redefined. There are individuals who are at odds with society due to personal shortcomings that only compound the already felt alienation as a member of an ethnic minority group.

Firdaus Kanga's autobiographical novel, *Trying to Grow*, is a story of double alienation. Brit's crippled body is the cause of his self alienation, reinforced by cultural alienation as a Parsi. Everything Indian, including the Hindu religion and family life, is looked down upon by the community. Early in the novel, the protagonist Brit is taken to a Hindu sadhu, Wagh Baba, to effect a cure for his osteogenesis. On the way, the father is rebuked by a friend: "Shame on you! Educated, speaking English so well and going to a mumbo jumbo Baba" (1). The fact that Brit's parents look down upon the traditional Hindu culture is revealed at the outset when his father says to his wife: "If I were a Hindu husband I would have thrashed you just now" (6).

Regarding socio-cultural relations, there is conflict within the family itself. Brit's sister decides to marry a non-Parsi as a token of protest against the Parsi community's anti-Hindu attitudes. She says: "Such shameful prejudice. Imagine saying that about Hindus. It's a scandal! You haven't learnt a thing from the National Integration campaign, have you? You went to sleep in 1947 and never woke up" (6).

The problems of identity facing the community could be traced to their undue allegiance to everything English. They seem to have ignored deliberately the Indian Nationalist Movement on account of their colonial predilections. The contempt towards even Indian independence seems to have reinforced their isolation from the Indian mainstream.

Two years before I was born, the Indian government, delirious with nationalism, banned the import of all consumer items. Unfortunately, we hadn't learnt to make enough of the things we needed. So we used to have sudden shortages of cheese and toilet paper, soap and butter, talc and

newsprint. But thanks to Sera we were immune to the empty shop shelves" (8).

The allegiance of the family to the British royal family reaches ridiculous heights when Brit's father talks reverently of his loyalty to the British and when his mother packs him off to one of those imitation Etons that are scattered all over India. "We are reluctant Indians," (27) as the protagonist himself says.

The social isolation of Brit is such that he is reminded of his difference at every stage of his life. His identity as a cripple makes him writhe under the humiliation till he is filled with disgust and hatred for himself, first as a boy and then an adolescent. He realises it the first time when Jeroo refers to him: "I forgot about your son. You understand, when I say men, I mean men. Not someone like you, Brit" (33). Brit represents a segment of the marginalized who get decentred and emotionally crippled owing to social ostracism.

The many fears of Brit get reinforced by the social exposure. At school he stands fifth in the class without attending a single day at school. He is given a prize at the annual Prize Day of the school because he has done so well though he is a cripple.

Around me the applause burst and swelled like some orchestral climax, while I grew smaller and smaller in my seat wishing I wasn't there, wishing Fr. Ferrer hadn't talked about me, wishing that I hadn't got this prize for having legs that didn't work" (48).

In Brit's case, the social isolation is such that instead of feeling honoured, he feels depressed owing to the fact that the deep divide between him and society is unbridgeable.

Set against the grim realities of social isolation and the communal divide is an occasional relaxation of social rigidities. What shines by contrast is the marriage of Brit's sister Dolly to Salim, a Muslim even though "the Muslims are the traditional, nay the historical, enemies of the Parsis" (140), the original diaspora from Iran to India, having been triggered by Arab overtures. Set in India, this love affair is free of the complications caused by diaspora. Brit is a fitting symbol of his community that tries to grow in spite of its introvert, insular nature and the

multiple external odds. This struggle for growing can be seen as a metaphor for the endeavours of his community in the same direction, and Brit's words reflect his community's yearning. "I have lived inside a crystal paper-weight and now I want to know the real world, other people who aren't like me" (150). Once he enters into a dialogic relationship with his readers, it becomes a liberating experience from his identity as a physically challenged Parsi, which made him doubly marginalized.

Brit's mother Sera is marked for the nostalgia for the British Raj as evident in her affection for the British royal family. And for her, Queen Elizabeth II is still Apni Rani, Our Queen. She is also a faithful listener of BBC Radio. The British connection is further accentuated by Brit's grandmother having an English lover. So complete is Sera's fascination with everything Western that her legs are compared to those of Betty Garble and her husband is supposed to be a Gregory Peck look-alike.⁵ The conflicting loyalties felt by Parsis caught between the Western world and India leave their future unresolved as they do not know how to live with their past and present. To this dilemma of his family Brit adds his personal opposition leaving fractured images of their reduced present and insecure future. At all points of social contact, what he ultimately receives is rejection. If he is accepted anywhere, it is either out of pity or as compensation. His attitude to society gets worse as time passes. "The main thrust of the book [is] in depicting the protagonist's attempts to find an identity for himself as he is buffeted between the ridicule of the neighbours on the one hand and the over-protective love of his parents on the other."⁶ Here, the individual's failure to enter into a meaningful dialogue with his society parallels his community's alienation.

When Brit's sister resolves to marry a Muslim, like most conservative Parsis, her parents are against it, being apprehensive

⁵S. Sengupta, "From Cripple to Whole: Quest for Identity in Firdaus Kanga's *Trying to Grow*," *Quest for Identity in Indian English Writing, Part I: Fiction*, ed., R. S. Pathak, New Delhi: Bahri Publications, 1992, 171-80.

⁶Sengupta, "From Cripple to Whole," 172.

that mixed marriages would result in the loss of their racial identity or uniqueness. Brit confesses thus: "When life came to solid things like marriage, everyone, even Sera and Sam, forgot how modern they are" (88). He refers to his parents as Sera and Sam, a mark of the family's 'modern' outlook with regard to such matters. Sera regards it as a shameful act of betrayal.

Brit fights his social isolation and feelings of loneliness by taking to writing. The publication of his story and the ensuing success inspire him and he says: "I got something bigger from that story, I didn't feel alone any more. How could I? I had just talked to fifty thousand people" (155). As against the social ostracism experienced earlier he starts living a fuller life since his success as a writer gives him an identity of his own: "I want to be what I really am, no more acts, no more reaching for things I am too short to reach" (230). Leaving behind his personal conflicts, he moves from a state of protected life to the real world of greater conflicts with hope. The author presents a method of resolving personal contradictions in preparation for resolving the larger contradictions and conflicts of a cross-cultural society. There is a conscious progression from confusion born of innocence and inaction to decisiveness and action which spring from a heightened consciousness of social reality:

The sophisticated narratives of Parsi writers ... explore the complex conflict between Parsiness, the Indian identity and the lure of the Western world. The general hilarity and comic situations only thinly disguise the underlying dilemma of the diasporic Parsis, at home neither in the East nor the West and whose understanding and acceptance of both are vitiated by the missing fragments of their own past.⁷

The protagonists' triumphant emergence from the maelstrom of personal and racial crises traces a progression from self-abnegation to self-actualisation, from self-absorption to awareness of racial identity, from defeatism to affirmation. This forward movement, effected through dialogue with other

⁷Nilufer E. Bharucha, "Reflections in Broken Mirrors: Diverse Diasporas in Recent Parsi Fiction," *Wasafiri* 21 (Spring 1995): 32-35. 34.

individuals and communities, determines their personal future as well as the destiny of their dwindling race, as vouchsafed by the Anglo-Indian counterparts.

3. The Anglo-Indian Dilemma

Allan Sealy's *The Trotter-Nama* is an epic chronicle of the Anglo-Indian community, whose presence troubles the process of imagining the nation in terms of homogeneous cultural authenticity, which many entertain, owing to their colonial mentality. In the colonial era, the community found it difficult to merge with the mainstream Indian society. As they spoke the colonizer's language and imitated their ways of living, they were, to their disadvantage, associated with the British whose response towards them was irresponsible and treacherous as set against their cherished expectations.

Sealy shows that it was an unjust act in no way short of exploitative selfishness and treacherous because it was these people who helped the British extend their colonial roots in India. Instead of acknowledging their service, the British looked down upon the Anglo-Indians and left them in the lurch. Mik, representing one of the seven generations of Trotters, becomes a symbol of thousands of his disbanded fellow community members, after they were found of no use to colonial interests.

The novel implies that historiography as a genre is in complicity with colonising tendencies because it considers the community as not part of the country's history in its socio-cultural perspective. Sealy's effort is to unseat historiography in an attempt to displace the colonizer-colonized conundrum as Anglo-Indians are as much Indian as any other Indians with a hybrid culture behind them.

The ancestral home of the Trotters, Sans Souci, converted into a hotel, becomes the history in miniature of the alienated community characterized by social ostracism. The community becomes a victim of cultural untouchability, unfairly laughed at as inferior Indians. In projecting the plight and struggle of the Trotters as that of his community, and suggesting that, in a way, social ostracism helped the community in coming out of the

sheltered exclusiveness, Sealy comprehensively records the entire history through seven generations. The emigration of thousands of the community has been caused by the marginalisation of the community in India. The solution once suggested was the demand for a separate Anglo-Indian state as evidenced by the opinions of one of the characters:

Home [...]. The Hindus wanted theirs, the Muslims wanted theirs, the British were going back to theirs. What about us? He had never taken seriously young Paul's Nicobar homeland idea – an island reserved for his people [...] could one have a home that one has never been to... (491-492).

Sealy shows the emptiness of demands for home and homeland, and rejects them as frivolous and farcical because a real home eludes them, their fate follows them wherever they go.

The emigrants' misery is given vent to through Marris, whose warning to people intending to migrate is "go and become bus conductors in London if you want. But don't come crying back to me". He also says "Melbourne is all very well, but can you get mangoes there? This is your home, serve it and it will serve you" (576). Sealy censures 'the packers-and-leavers' and leaves the message in candid terms not only for the members of his community but for other communities as well to accept India as their homeland. Tony Jesudasan has aptly remarked on Sealy's epic achievement as a definitive document of his community: "Sealy's handling of the Anglo-Indian theme is emotive and Herculean. He has done for his community what in a sense Joyce did for the Irish, illuminating its soul through sheer poetry and imagination."⁸ He enters into a dialogue with the readers, which encourages them to re-examine some of the long-held notions about this community that has always stood apart from the mainstream population of India.

The documentary nature of the novel ensures its intrinsic worth as a compendium of lived experiences. "Sealy's success lies in documenting cataclysmic changes and proffering

⁸Tony Jesudasan, "An Anglo-Indian Odyssey," *The Indian Express* Jan 07, 1989, 45.

suggestions also as he holds community Kodak in literary terms."⁹ The book is on a community that was created in the meeting place between the colonizer and the colonized, to which Sealy himself belongs, a biographical and self-reflexive text grounded in the hybridity of two cultures.

The problem of hybridity is highlighted in the petition of the Anglo-Indians of Calcutta addressed to the British parliament. The petitioners speak of, inter alia, the disabilities the community is faced with:

That they are descended in most instances on the father's side, from European subjects of the crown, of Great Britain, and on the mother's side, from the natives of India, and that in other instances they are the children of inter marriages between offspring of such connections, but that, although thus closely allied to the European and native races, they are excluded from almost all those advantages which each respectively enjoys, from which both are exempt (287-288).

The Anglo-Indian diaspora is actually a subaltern history, which smacks of isolation and discrimination, partly redeemed by a minuscule representation of the community in the Parliament of India. Apart from this, the community's ostracism still continues to be painfully real.

Sealy's *Dedication* remains a deliberate mystery to the extent that it is never clear whether the 'other' Anglo-Indians to whom he refers are the fictional and symbolic, yet historically 'real' ones of his novel, or the flesh-and-blood, but beaten, seedy, and unknown brethren out there somewhere today.¹⁰

Caught in the cross-fire of history and the ambiguous interplay of love and hate, the tiny Anglo-Indian minority is looked down upon by both parent communities. Yet, they are modern India's first metamorphic children endowed with a "stereoscopic

⁹Avadesh Kumar Singh, "The Trotter-Nama: I. Allan Sealy's 'I-Witness' Hi/story of His Anglo-Indian Community," ed., Alain Qaiser Zoha, *Commonwealth: Language and Literature*, New Delhi: Bahri, 1997, 117-24, 123.

¹⁰Rukmini Bhaya Nair, "The Buccaneers' Saga," *Indian Literature* 35.6 (Nov-Dec 1992): 73-79, 76.

vision"¹¹ as insiders and outsiders to the society in which they were born. In spite of their anchoring in objective reality, Sealy's imaginary town and home reveal the inevitable sense of loss that haunts people who straddle two cultures and interferes with their homing instinct:

Was home the place where one was born? Or the place where one hopes to bury one's bones? Was home the place where your ancestors lay dead? Or where your grandmother-in-law and your little daughter lay buried? Or a place in your mind where you weren't? The place of your deepest sleep? The place of your waking dreams? Could you have two homes [...] and come and go forever between them? (489)

The obsessive search for the meaning of home is a recurring theme in Parsi and Anglo-Indian novels. The frontiers of geography, culture and language, the territorial, blood and linguistic bonds do enter into conflicting relationships to render their identity problematic. The repressive years in history constitute painful experiences. The Governor General's decree said: "No person the son of an European by a Native mother shall serve in the Company's army as an officer. Such persons may be admitted as fifers, drummers or farriers" (202). Yet when the rejected Anglo-Indians join the Maratha Confederacy their activity is considered "treasonous" (223).

The complaint of Jacob-Kahn Trotter in the House of Lords that "we are sometimes Europeans and sometimes Natives, as it suits the purposes of the government" (207) strangely foreshadows the grievances of the immigrant population in western countries in the postcolonial era. The conflict between religious and national loyalties, the incompatibility between customs and civil Law, the fight for equal opportunities, and the plight of minorities on which the democratic system is based are burning issues even today.

During the First World War, a number of Anglo-Indians fought on the British side "who in the moment of their death were transformed into Britons. Their records and posthumous

¹¹Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands*, London: Granta, 1991, 19.

awards stated, concisely, 'Born in India'" (432). The England-educated eye-specialist, Paul Trotter, is not found respectable enough to treat European women. He is denied entry into the Nakhlu Club and is redirected towards the Anglo-Indian club. He is bitter about the liminality of his status as a child of the Empire, of mixed parentage. To recover from this hurt, he marries a domiciled European. Thus, the story of the community is a sad one in so far as it is marked by colonial oppression and discrimination of a unique kind. This prompts the members of the community to leave the Indian social fabric and emigrate to countries like Australia even though that itself involves problems of eligibility parameters.

The stress continues in the years preceding Independence. The community continues to be mocked for being "two-in-one" (282), unaware that, in the process of history, their own identity has been transfigured by 300 years of British proximity since there is no total acculturation. There can be only the emergence of a hyphenated way of life.

Sealy is deeply aware of the risks involved in social relationships and cultural interfaces in India: "But what is this India? Is it not a thousand shifting surfaces which enamour the newcomer and then swallow him up?" (134). *The Trotter-Nama* is a special blend of Indian, Persian and English modes of representation and it tries to make a point that life in this country is far from simple from the cultural point of view. The *Nama* is a Persian term for a chronicle. The Anglo-Indians are the products of a reciprocal metamorphosis of the European sense of order and the Indian savouring of pleasure with all consequential cultural decentring and multiple needs.

5. Conclusion

The authors of these novels are acutely aware of the infinite contrasts and contradictions involved in the interactions of the various segments of society – a society cut up and compartmentalized on the basis of religion, caste, sub-caste, language, customs and conventions, creed and colour. They cannot ignore these social realities except at the cost of their

credibility. The conflicts of the cross-cultural nature are an unmistakable sign of a dynamic society undergoing the travails of change and growth, innovations and adaptations, all accompanied by painful experiences of breaching the customs held dear for centuries and reaching out to new possibilities and opportunities. Alienation, at multiple levels and subsequent conflicts all point to the need for dialogue. But the task is highly complicated because of the pronounced differences in perceptions and beliefs. Yet, effective tools of communication have to be found. Of them, the most relevant is open-ended dialogue with a willingness to re-evaluate belief systems and subsequent behaviour patterns. The idea of polyphony and a multiplicity of textual voices are at the heart of these writers' ideas about fiction and their belief in its ultimate validity as the privileged arena of discourse.

This paper, having examined the significant expansions and alterations in the nature of Indian reality as depicted in selected Parsi and Anglo-Indian novels, has found that they raised radical questions regarding traditional assumptions and attitudes. The turmoil and anguish of these new circumstances formulate a new consciousness about the role of dialogue in society. The complicated and conflicting contours of the ambiguous and shifting relations that exist between individuals and groups in a pluralistic community resist homogenization and can thrive only through dialogue. The difficulties engendered by the disintegration of societal structures, individuation and personal differences, ideological exclusivisms, the poverty of communication – all are contained within narratives that suggest a supposedly prosperous and secure world but which, at closer glance, reveals itself as self-questioning. Without the use of any overt propaganda, there is a subtle projection of values and commitment to ideals of freedom and justice, in the context of an evolving individual and national consciousness. Destabilizing tradition, and turning from convention, alternatives are sought to re-frame experiences which were formerly felt to be dissonant with social expectations by constituting them as new cultural possibilities. By

defamiliarizing the taken-for-granted assumptions, by posing questions, by uncovering the underlying conflicts, by suggesting re-assessment and re-definition, these novels help in formulating a consciousness which can ultimately bring about a constructive change in society. They present a world busy discarding the old answers, and in its contradictions and ambivalences, this fiction embodies the clashes of a society questioning its values. By dismantling the structuring binary opposition of centre and margin in portraying the encounter of cultures and in conceptualizing the conflict between tradition and modernity, the process of transculturation is found to be the inevitable reality of not only contemporary India, but the world at large. The recognition of interpretative multiplicity, of the indeterminacy and heterogeneity of cultural meaning takes away complacent notions about self, family, society and nation. Affiliations are shifting and multiple, cultural stereotypes are broken down, religious antagonisms, ethnocentric histories, and sporadic violence prove that the social identity of every Indian is grounded in traditional religious identifications and communalism. Together, these bring about deep-set psychological anxieties and animosities towards the other. As the changing pressures of modernization and secularism in a multicultural society grate at this entrenched communalism, and as each group vies for power, ethnic-religious conflicts ignite the clash of religious and cultural identities. All these works point to the need for integration through dialogue if India is to live up to her reputation of unity in diversity. The multifarious voices and those rendered voiceless need to be brought into the truly productive arena of dialogue if our society is to march ahead in the path of multiculturalism grounded in secularism. These novels have gone a long way in opening readers' eyes to this burning issue of our times and in acknowledging dialogue as the need of the hour in fostering understanding, acceptance, tolerance and celebration of differences within the layered plurality of contemporary societies, not just in the Indian context, but globally.