



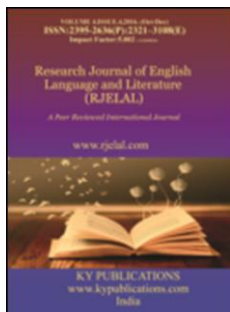
## SKIN DEEP CREATES REFORM IN PARSI COMMUNITY

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### ABSTRACT



Parsi is one of two Zoroastrian communities originally from Persia primarily currently located in India. It is miniscule small minority community in India. During the pre-colonial period the Parsis did not exercise any special influence on Indian society; But with the arrival of the Europeans the Parsis completely redefined their identity by transforming themselves into the richest community in India and they adopted western life style. However, with the departure of the British, their decline began on a rapid scale. There are various reasons cited for their decline even though ethnic conflict is considered to be the most important reason. The Parsis are Zoroastrians from Persia and they maintain their ethnic uniqueness even today. Despite various arguments which claim that the Parsis did mingle and assimilate into Indian society, the Paris of the present generation claim ethnic purity and observe the practises of their forefathers quite religiously. In these consequences, writers play a predominant role for protecting their ethnicity and convey their ethnicity from one generation to next generation through their writings. Among them, Nergis Dalal is one of India's most well-known and prodigious Parsi writers. This paper deals how Nergis Dalal does not confine her writing to imaginary fiction and how she extends her view for revealing reality and advice reformation of Parsi community in India through her novel Skin Deep.

Key Words: Community, ethnicity, Persia, Prodigious, Reformation, Zoroastrianism,

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Nergis is one of India's most well-known and prodigious Parsi writers. She did not confine her writing to a particular genre; her writing range covered short stories, novels, middles and even books on cookery and yoga, which is a best-selling book. Her output during the past seven decades has indeed been enormous; it includes four full-length novels, over 125 short stories and more than 2000 middles, besides hundreds of articles and essays. Writing came naturally to her; she had developed an uncanny knack of observing and discovering small incidents in and around her neighbourhood, in zoos

and museums, in market place, and even in her own household. She turned these little incidents into fascinating center pieces of her "middles". Through her middles, articles and novels she depicted not only the funny moments but also the reality issues in society which moves the heart of the readers. In this consequences, Her middles gave her a greater recognition; these short pieces used to adorn the edit pages of mainstream English newspapers such as *The Times of India*, *The Statesman*, *Hindustan Times*, *The Tribune* and many others during the five decades from 1940s to 1990s; the middles brought

her much fame and made her a household name "Middles Queen of India".

During 1975-85, her articles drew attention to the then ongoing degradation of Mussoorie hills, owing to indiscriminate limestone quarrying. A PIL was also filed in the Supreme Court against the menace of merciless quarrying; the petitioner's lawyers liberally quoted from her articles to prove their point. Like she is always close to the society as a social reformer. As a Parsi she has also an anxiety about her community that is she revealed in her one of the novels *Skin Deep* which is on the superficiality of appearances, on love and betrayal. The novel has a Parsi background, and looks at Parsis and their interaction with other groups in India. Nergis writes the story of the Parsi family who has twin children and who strictly follow the values and rituals of their Parsi community. Nergis Dalal wants to reform her Community to make changes in the thoughts of Parsi people in her novel *Skin Deep*.

The novel *Skin Deep* is wonderful story of twin sisters named Nazz and Yasmin. They are not identical twins. Yasmin is blessed with the kind of beauty and Naaz can only dream about. Nergis Dalal, in exploring the relationships between the non-identical twins, Yasmin and Naaz who were often freighted with a rocky mix of emotions and most of the time they disregard and envy each other, leading to anguish and confusion on the playground, in the home, and in the school is sought to exploit psychoanalysis by the novelist, for her creative purpose focusing on the twin's experiences negotiating their layered feelings toward each other sister shapes their psychology as forcefully as their relationships do, with their parents. Naaz in her heart of hearts thought.. ...

"No one loved me, I cried, because I was not pretty like Yasmin, and Sophie deliberately dressed me in clothes that made me look ridiculous. I hated those horrible dresses she forced me to wear". (Pg.24)

Similarly, the author creates the protagonist Nazz character which resembles the Parsi community itself. Here the twin sisters Nazz and Yasmin resemble like Parsi community and dominant Hindu community. Parsi people also suffered with the

dominant Siva Sena (Hindu) people politically and socially at Bombay in Maharashtra. Zoroastrian or Parsi had to flee from Persia to escape the religious persecution by the Muslims who establish Islam in the eighth century. Primarily, they come to sanjan in Gujarat then later settled in Bombay due to their trade and ship business. Initially they have very good recognition in India with the Britishers, the rulers of pre independence India. After independence, they couldn't get any importance and also insulted and threaten by the dominant neighbour community of Hindu Shiv Sena. Because of less number the Parsi could be marginalised in the society.

Nergis expresses her anguishes through the Nazz character is clearly exhibits the Parsi community's marginalization by their twin brother like Hindu community in Bombay. Parsis have their own distinct culture, language and customs. When the time of their migration from Persia to India, Parsis give a promise to adapt the local language Gujarat to Jadav Rana who is king of Gujarat. Consequently they are fascinated by Britishers and use English very clearly and conveniently like their native language. Shiv Sena forcibly insist them to speak Marathi instead of Gujarathi and English languages in Bombay. Through the domestic crises of one middle class Parsi family, one of the Parsi writers, Rohinton Mistry conveys everything from the dilemmas among Indian Parsis as a marginalized community to the wider concerns of corruption and communalism. His novel *Family Matters* presents Shiv Sena as a Hindu fundamentalist force fully involved in rioting, looting and burning the poor and the innocent people. The city of Bombay was generally tense due to the agitation of the parochial Shiv Sena. The activists of the party would generally go from shop to shop to demand changing the language of the sign boards from English to Marathi. "We are simply stating the rule, your signboard must change. If this is not taking place in one week, it will be very bad." (*Family matters*, 385). The protagonist Nariman's son-in-law Yezad falsely reported to his employer Mr. Kapoor that two Shiv Sena workers had demanded twenty thousand rupees in case he did not want to change the signboard as desired by them. Mr. Kapoor, a self-respecting idealist would rather pay up than change the language and thereby

change the cosmopolitan character of the city of Bombay. But the plan misfired and real Shiv Sena men showed up one day. Mr. Kapoor easily worked up to a confrontation and lost his life at their hands. (Ritu Gupta-2). Mistry shows the violence of Shiv Sena towards other community in picturesque way. It depicts how Parsi community feels pain as marginalised and struggles in India.

Nazz is not the favourite of Sophie, her English mother so that Nazz is looking after by her grandmother. She has the unconditional love of her strong-willed Parsi grandmother, who helps her build a world that cannot be infringed by Yasmin. Her grandmother helps her to get educated and become skilled in areas such as efficient management of finances, running a smooth household and developing her personal poise in a dignified manner. She always used to motivate Naaz by saying,

“You have to make the most of everything you can do and Yasmin can’t – you are clever and can work hard to do better, not only better than Yasmin but better than everyone in your class. Don’t try to compete with Yasmin. Be different, make people look up to you because of your exceptional abilities and focused work ethic’. (Pg. 25)

Naaz decides to excel in ways that Yasmin never can, and is relieved when their lives move in different directions. Nazz’s managing skill and individuality represents Parsi community’s skill and talent in Trade and Business and in political India. Author makes reader to remember Parsis great contribution in India for India’s development.

As a Parsi, Nergis Dalal also wants to reveal the Parsi culture through her writings to society at large and also passes the culture to next generations of Parsi. Hence in her novel, the protagonist Nazz follows her Parsi grandmother for celebrating ceremonies religiously in her life. In her childhood, her grandmother celebrates Navjote for her and Yasmin (twin sisters) at their house. Nergis Dalal reveals the greatness of the purification ritual and its significance. Parsi children are officially inducted into the Zoroastrian faith through the ritual of Navjote. Parsi parents are very particular about

celebrating Navjote, the first ritual in the lives of their children. It is done between the seventh and the eleventh year of the child. After prayers, the child is given the sacred items that are associated with Zoroastrianism: a sacred shirt and cord, Sudra, and Kusti. The child then faces the main priest and fire is brought in to represent God. Once the priest finishes with the prayers, the child’s initiation is completed and he or she is now a part of the community and religion.

Firstly Nahn or purification baths had been given to both Nazz and Yasmin before the ceremony of Navjote began. Invitations were sent out and masses of pink, scented roses and white tuberose ordered. Dressed in silk pajamas, fine white shawls covering the upper portion of their bare bodies and embroidered caps on their heads, they were led to the dais where the ceremony would take place. Four Priests dressed completely in white, with gold embroidered cummerbunds, were waiting. The children were supposed to chant the prayers in time with the priests, the sudras were slipped over their heads as the shawls were removed and the kustis wound three times around their waists. (Skin Deep, 61)

However, the past has an uneasy way of catching up with the future, with unforeseen consequences for everyone. In this respect, Nazz marries a Punjabi named Ramesh. In fact Parsi has not permitted to inter-faith marriages. Marriage from a Zoroastrian point of view is a religious duty/discipline. Children of men married to women outside the faith are considered Parsis but not those of the women.

Actually Nazz father marries an English woman, which is not liked by her grandmother because, as a Parsee, she opposes the inter-faith marriages which leads to a dilution of faith. The Parsi aversion for mixed marriages should not be confused with "racial superiority" or "communal prejudice". For Parsis, marrying within the community is important from the point of view of "self-preservation". Parsis are a historic people perpetuating an unique ethic of living. They are torchbearers of a rich culture and heritage.

According to them, Inter-faith marriage leads to a dilution of faith and weakening of cultural bonds. Parsis do not claim racial superiority. But as sociologist Martin Luther King said, "I want the white man to be my brother, not my brother-in-law". Parsis treat all Indians as their brothers, but would prefer not to have them as their brothers-in-law. (Noshir H. Dadrawala) According to their marriage law, the children Naaz and Yasmin considered as Parsis. But they do not know anything about their religion and culture because of their paradesi mother who is not allowed to Parsi temple and performing religious rituals. In this occasion grandma said, "This is what comes of marrying a paradesi. I warned you (her son) that the children would grow up neither one thing nor the other. (*Skin Deep*,58).

Parsis give a prominent importance to their culture and religion. So that Naaz's Grand mother goes through all the proper ceremonies when their children come back to home in India even after inter-faith marriage. Even though Sophia is not accepted to their religion and its rituals and not allowed to their Fire Temple in which this is closed and secret from paradesis.

The front verandah, porch and stairs had been decorated with fishes, flowers, birds and geometrical designs stamped from perforated tin moulds, and filled with chalk powder. Every doorway was strung with torans of flowers and leaves, mostly roses and jasmine. The family were there in full force to welcome the new bride Sophia. As she descended from the car and came up the stairs, her mother-in-law was waiting to do the achool meecho ceremony to welcome the bride. A large, flat silver tray was filled with symbols of good luck and prosperity—rice grains, sugar crystals, dried dates and rose water in a gulabush made of silver, reminders of our Persian heritage. Sophie was garlanded, kumkum applied to her forehead and then the silver tray was circled six times around her head. Then took a raw egg from the tray and broke it near the doorway to keep away the evil eye. The coconut was also circled in the same way over sophia's head and banged down near the egg. There were cheers as it cracked neatly into two; it is considered very lucky if the coconut breaks at the

very first try. Sugar was placed in bride's mouth and rose petals and grains of uncooked rice in her cupped hands before she was asked to step into the house with her right foot. Another larger tray had been prepared with clothes, jewellery and gifts for the bride. Through her protagonist Naaz, and her grandmother, author shows their customs and values of their community which are observed from their ancient Zoroastrianism.

As a Parsi, Naaz also knows about self preservation of their community faith. Even though she marries Ramesh who is other than her community because she is not inured to the pain, the feeling of panic caused by her unattractive physical beauty. Her grandmother always used to motivate Naaz but she expresses her inner feeling as "There is no use telling me that beauty is only skin deep, and that the qualities of head and heart are what endure. It is the outer shell that makes an impression and often it is the only thing that is seen. (*Skin Deep*,34). Married to Paradesi is no Parsi would approve. "Parsis think of themselves as very special people; a pure Aryan race, not to be corrupted or contaminated by marriage with outsiders" (*Skin Deep*,103). Ramesh belongs to Punjabi Family having mother, father and one teenaged retarded sister named Sunitha. His father has retired from railways and he is working as an engineer cum architect designer. Before marriage Ramesh parents meet Naaz and ask a dowry. They say that Punjabis expect the girl to bring a good dowry. It is not legal but no one bothers much about. For them dowry is specially important in order to get their daughter Sunita's marriage. Naaz quite willing to do whatever is needed in fact 'it is not the custom among Parsis to give dowries' (*Skin Deep*,113).

Here Nergis Dalal shows the mingling attitude which is necessary for Parsi existence in multi cultural society. She convinces the Parsi people to keep face with the changing social mores. Actually Parsis have some values and customs which are followed strictly since they arrived. That's why, they isolated from other community people consciously but it is opposed to their promise to King Jadav Rana at the time of their arrival. According to their history, after the collapse of the

Persian empire at the battle of Nehavend in 642 A.D. those Persian who clung to the beliefs of Zoroaster were forced by the religious persecution of the Muslims to leave their homeland. The Parsis initially settled at Hormuz on the Persian Gulf, but finding themselves still persecuted they set sail for India arriving in the 8th century. They settled first at Diu. After their stay for about 19 years, they set sail towards the south and landed at the port of Sanjan in Gujarat around 785 A.D. Sanjan was then ruled by the liberal monarch, king Jadhav Rana. The Dastur who was heading these refugees approached the king, narrated their story and sought permission to settle down in Sanjan. The Dastur also gave details of the basic tenets of Zoroastrianism in sixteen Sanskrit shlokas. Initially Jadhav Rana was hesitant about giving shelter to the refugees from Persia and verbal communication became a problem between the king and newly arrived Parsis. Then the king ordered his men to bring a bowl full of milk, implying that there was no room in his kingdom where they could be accommodated. The Parsis with their ready wit poured a few grains of sugar in the bowl, conveying that they would mix and mingle unobtrusively like sugar in the milk. Another symbolic significance of the gesture is that just as sugar sweetens milk, the presence of Parsis amidst the local community would sweeten the later. The king gladly agreed to allow them to live in his kingdom. Moved by the reasoning of this priest, the king asked him to narrate their actual requirements. (*Skin Deep*,135)

Nergis Dalal wants to remember their promise which the community people given to the King that is mingling like a sugar is not followed in the marriage practices. She also expresses her intension of anguish about their dwindling in number which is impact of their religious beliefs and values. She also encourages the community people to follow the modern livelihood practices in order to enhance their community strength by keeping their community beliefs aside.

In her novel, the protagonist Nazz obeys their in-laws beliefs and makes her life happy and comfortably. Once she meets her in-laws at their home along with Ramesh after marriage, Nazz observes her mother –in-law’s intension as

“I wondered briefly if she expected me to stoop down and touch her feet in respect – a custom almost universally prevalent in India, but not amongst the Parsis. I thought it well to start as I intended to continue”. (*Skin Deep*,110)

She also thinks that she has surrounded by the people who mattered most in her life and “ I would reflect their views, their impressions and, of course, their own innate prejudice. (*Skin Deep*,109). Author desires that if her community has the same feeling like Nazz, it will be easy to them to mingling and focuses on their number increasing.

In the early years, Nazz and Ramesh happily lead their life in Delhi and give birth to twin children named Zubin and Cyrus. Nazz helps her in-laws for their daughter Sunitha marriage. Nazz goes Haridwar and Rishikesh along with her mother-in-law and sister-in-law for fulfil their wishes before Sunitha’s marriage. Ramesh gets angry and says it is all superstitious nonsense but Nazz arranges all to them for a trip. There Nergis Dalal reveals many Hindu customs and the greatness of Ganga water and also shows the beggars and animals that are present in that areas and comments some of the wrong practices which is followed by Hindus in pilgrimages. Here author wants to compare the religious practices and reveals Parsis practicality and their great and sincere faith to their culture.

Filled with wit and wisdom, and written in sparkling prose, *Skin Deep* unravels the many layers that exist within the bonds of family and marriage. Author mentioned the dowry system and dowry deaths in India in the story. In India, every parent believes that marriage gives security for a girl. She will be safe with a family of her own. In this respect, Nazz’s in-laws do their daughter’s marriage to Mr. Kapoor. After three weeks Sunita died because of accident done in kitchen. These are very common in India. Dowry deaths as they were called, were widely prevalent all over India. Author comments on dowry deaths as, “People who might have hesitated to trap a rat and kill it thought nothing of pouring Kerosene over a young woman and throwing a lighted match to turn her into a living torch. (*SkinDeep*, 203)

It is one of the social problems in India. Ramesh and his parents hesitate to put a case on sunitha's husband and in-law's. Through these incidents, Nergis depicts the evil of Indian patriarchal society and lack of gender equality in India. As a social reformer, Nergis Dalal depicts the evil of the society which makes readers think about the evil and its problem. When the reader starts to think, that creates revolt against evil and gets the change in society and reform the society. In this regard, Nergis Dalal expects reform in her own Community and society of India.

Finally, Nergis Dalal shows how Parsi women live comfortably in patriarchal society with their education and their skill of management. Naz is also affected by patriarchal society and she is asked for divorce by Ramesh, after he meets with Yasmin who is twin sister of Naz. She is very much pained by his decision and decides to sign the divorce papers as her husband wishes. She also decides to look after her children on her own. In the meanwhile Ramesh dies with heartache. She doesn't want to give any chance to her sister Yasmin to interfere her life. At last she keeps her sister in distance and bravely faces all problems and provides comfort zone to her sons. She decides that, leads life as Parsi and brings up her children in Parsi culture. She wants to lead her life courageously with her grandmother's inspiration. Nergis Dalal wishes that in spite of all problems, Community should maintain assimilation and adapting the other practices which are helpful their existence and comfort life besides their ethnicity. Author shows the women empowerment in the patriarchal society through the protagonist Naz character and also her grandmother character.

Nergis Dalal's *Skin Deep* sets in Dehra Dun, Delhi and Hyderabad, explores the complexities of human relationships, and the deep, unfathomable passions that motivate people. Reader clearly knows the Parsi culture and rituals since one's birth to death. It exhibits not only author's ethnicity towards her Parsi community but also the human relations and empowerment through the protagonist Naz. She tells that her community also initially very happy with others in India. Gradually they have faced so many insults and marginalised politically and socially

in India. Due to that the Parsi people migrated from India to other countries. Here author shows her intension through Naz character that if the Parsi assimilates in Indian society there is no question of migration.

Finally, all the writers mainly express their anguish about their community identity and their place in India after post-colonial period. Hence they depicted the Parsi culture through Parsi rituals and their unique values which represent their ethnicity. Thus, the Parsi voice in recent Indian English fiction has been raised to assert the Parsi ethnic identity. Among the writers, Nergis Dalal extends her role for their community and gives way for comfort existence in India through Naz character in her novel. Nergis Dalal through her novel *Skin Deep* suggests reforms to her community for their bright future in India. Author hopes that *Skin Deep* in Parsi Community not only give pleasure of reading but also will create the reform in the Community views for their progress.

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