Chapter Five

Reconciling the Past with the Present:
The Novels of Boman Desai
Boman Desai was born and raised in a Parsee family, Bombay, but has spent most of his life in Chicago. He moved to Chicago in 1969 for his studies at the University of Illinois. He obtained his Bachelor’s degree in Psychology and Masters in English. He lives and works in Chicago now. He has worked in various capacities including farmhand, bartender, dishwasher, short-order cook, secretary, musician, bookstore clerk, telephone operator, auditor and teacher. He began writing in 1976. He is a winner of Illinois Arts Council Award, 1990 and also the Stand Magazine award. He paints intimate portraits of the Parsee Community in his books. A prominent literary figure of the Indian Diaspora, he blends his memories of India with its ever-changing reality in his fiction. His first novel, The Memory of Elephants (1998) is a poignant portrait of the Pars community in India. His second novel, Asylum, USA focuses on the religious, ethnic and cultural differences that shape the Parsee identity. A Woman Madly in Love, his third novel, is about a Parsee woman who starts out a journey blindly, but then her experiences transform her and take her closer to her real self. The characters in Desai’s novels, especially his first two novels, deal with the complex questions of ‘being’ and ‘belonging’ by going back to the community’s past. When asked in an interview by Vineetha Mokkil as to how
strongly the consciousness of being born into the Indian Parsee community has influenced his writing he said, “When I lived in Mumbai, I took my Parsi identity for granted. But oddly enough, when I moved to the United States, I became acutely conscious of it. People there always asked me why I didn’t look ‘Indian’. Then I would explain that I am a Parsi, born in India” (Desai in an interview to Mokkil).

Desai’s mother, a piano teacher, introduced him to the piano when he was a child. He was groomed into an ardent music lover. He plays and composes music and has a huge record collection about which he is very possessive. He keeps in touch with India and visits his family in Mumbai once a year. But he does not feel at home here even after the thirty odd years of separation. Desai confesses candidly, “No, I do feel a bit out of place. My Hindi is rusty, I can’t stand the heat. So I try and schedule my visit when it’s not too hot. But I don’t feel completely at home in the United States either, being an Indian in America sets you apart, even after many years” (Desai in an interview to Choudhury). Desai, like his characters, seems to belong to different worlds, and is not at home in any. This ‘homelessness’ inspires him to continue his journey as a writer. Straddling two cultures, like his protagonists, Homi, Noshir and Farida, he crafts his Parsee and American identities into an elegant tapestry of experiences. Though he sees himself as part of the group of Indian-English writers, he thinks that such categories are incidental. He believes that he is a Parsee and therefore, he writes about the Parsees. He uses his Parseeness as a“springboard into other cultures” (Das: 2001).
THE MEMORY OF ELEPHANTS

Much of Boman Desai’s fiction deals with memory and with the re-enactment of his past experiences resulting in a blend of autobiography and fiction. *The Memory of Elephants* is a good tautological case in point. The central character in *Elephants*, Homi alias Hormus Seervai, is a Bombay Parsee. A brilliant research student in the USA, he invents a machine, a memoscan that allows him to rewind to any memory he wishes to retrieve. It permits him to scan his memory for the recollections of his love-life and in doing so; he slips into the “collective unconscious” of his community and even talks to his ancestors. As a result, he is now in his semi-conscious state, without a short-term memory, and totally at the whim of an unrelenting past. Slipping in and out of time and space, Homi’s memory takes him as far back as the 7th century, when the Parsees were driven from ‘Pars’ or ‘Persia’ what is now called as Iran by the conquering Arabs. They sought refuge in India, their land of exile, which has almost become their ‘home’ now. Through the memoscan he relives episodes in the lives of three generations of his family and in effect produces a detailed saga, transporting readers into 19th century India, England, Scotland and also HongKong. The forty chapters are grouped around six characters, all closely related. Apart from Homi himself, there are Rusi, his younger brother, his parents and his two grandmothers with their distinct narrative voices delineating the personal, family and professional lives of the Parsees, a miniscule yet important minority of the upper-class Indian society, particularly of Bombay. It would be very apt to take into account Bharucha’s observations about the novel:

*Elephants* concerns itself most directly with the question of Parsee identity. It focuses on all four elements of this identity – religion, ethnicity, history and consciousness of elite status (Bharucha, 1994: 76).

The intriguing device of memoscan gives Homi ‘the memory of elephants, the memory of whales, the equation of the universe’ (405). The memoscan is the instrument which activates the collective unconscious of the Parsees what Homi’s Bapaiji, his paternal grandmother, calls the ‘memory of the ‘soul’. Homi, the protagonist, had hooked himself on to the memoscan in a fit of self-destruction, but
instead of reliving the moments of lovemaking with the American girl, Candace who had then rejected him, he is privileged to live the past of all Parsees. By understanding the Parsee past as well as his own, he comes to terms with the present, just as the Parsee community could also adjust to the present day realities by comprehending the make-up of its identity. He not only remembers the past from his own perspective, he also peeps into and actually participates in the perspectives of others. In the persona of Homi, in fact, all Parsees are encompassed. He is the archetypal ‘Bawaji’, the sobriquet to the typical Parsee man. In tracing ‘Bawaji’s’ genealogy, all Parsees find their roots. This objective of tracing the Parsee identity back into their racial history is stated in the ‘Prologue’, the very exposition of the novel:

I am a bawaji, the son of the son of and so on and so on of a bawaji; but as my Bapaiji, my paternal grandmother, whom everyone (including her son) called Bapaiji, as if it were her name, recently said to me: ‘You are a bawaji, Hormusji,…but you do not know what it means to be a bawaji, you should be ashamed (1).

The technique of memoscan enhances the omniscience of the omniscient narrator. It enables this ‘Bawaji’, Homi, to zoom in and focus upon important scenes from his and his racial past. In fact, Homi’s personal memories constantly overlap with those of his race, as the memoscan in camera-like movements zeroes in on events. The supple movement of images imparts a film-like quality to Homi’s memories. Like Sidhwa’s Man, this novel too, is technically the most ambitious of all the recent novels written by Parsees. The innovative concept of memoscan, a flashback technique, lends credibility to the whole narrative. Again, like Lenny, Homi has a limited point of view but it is expanded and broadened by the author’s omniscient view from behind. Also what is surprising is that Homi is not just the onlooker of the past but the ‘dead’ notice him as an observer; talk and interact with him too. The shifting points of view in the narration make the novel more complex technically. The memoscan becomes like an invocation-device as it happens in the third section called “Mom and Dad”. Through this neo-narrative technique, the dead not only speak and communicate but act and participate in the main stream of action. Hence, the narrative is rendered ‘autobiographical-within-autobiographical’. Plunging into the personal stream of consciousness and then to the collective one and from there on to the personal, the memoscan goes on to interweave the past into the present and images of
Homi’s family become superimposed on those of Arabs and Persian soldiers. Homi’s consciousness becomes the horizon where the personal and the racial memories merge.

Here the shared racial history of Parsees is invoked to highlight one aspect of the Parsee identity. Juxtaposed with the detailed Parsee history is the issue that concerns the modern Parsees -- the identity crisis of a race which no longer knows where its ‘home’ is. When Rusi declares the good news that Homi has been discharged from the hospital and is well enough to go home the next day, Homi’s innocent query reflects this predicament of the community, “Home? Where? Aquihana or Bombay?” (21). The answer that Rusi gives is: “Tomorrow, Aquihana – in a week, Bombay.” Bombay, i.e. India and Aquihana, i.e. USA are both their ‘homes’ and still the Parsees are comfortable at neither of the two places. The pangs of displacement, loss of home and the feeling of being in exile still continue to persist with the second displacement after crossing the borders of India. Homi’s ‘cri de’coeur’ reflects a lack of the sense of belongingness, which becomes more acute with the second displacement, though a voluntary exile, this time, to the ‘foreign’ land. Apart from this current issue of the crisis of Parsee identity and the loss of their ‘home’, Homi, through his tryst with the collective unconscious, and through him the author is able to explore far deeper issues: “the definition of ‘self’ not only in a multicultural milieu but also in a colonized culture; or as the author puts it, “the pilgrimage to all things Anglo”, the strange contradiction of an India that is culturally chauvinistic yet submissive in its relation to England; and the freeing and fearsome aspects to being foreign, inside and outside of one’s own culture” (Schrecengost).

Parsees’ leaning to the Occident make them feel proud of their western and ‘foreign’ associations and they tend to ignore and forget the grandeur of their own past, the glorious history of their valorous emperors and the soundness of their faith. Homi’s psychological experiences are so intense that the narrative acquires the magnitude of a vision. Hence, there is an element of incredibility, though only initially, in Homi’s’ perception of reality. Homi very soon overcomes this problem of delusion and understands clearly what Bapaji says to him:
The first time Bapaji “spoke” to me she said, “Are, Hormus, my lost-in-America-grandson, this is your Bapaji speaking, not your mamaiji – or are you too much American now to remember what little Gujarati you so eagerly learned from me?” (28).

Homi recognizes her immediately by her irony. He hated Gujarati and it was because she was the only person with whom he spoke it and that was the only reason he had to learn it. He thinks that she should have learnt English if it meant that much to her to speak with her grandsons, Rusi and Homi. They spoke English with everyone who could, Hindi with everyone who couldn’t; Bapaiji could speak Hindi, but wouldn’t.

Homi is often confronted with the clash between his Parsi identity and the Indian identity. His mother’s westernized family typifies the westward-looking Parsees and is distanced from the Indian reality. Homi’s mother’s contact with the mainstream Indian society is restricted to the men and women who work as servants in her home. Bapaiji, 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 Parsees during the colonial rule has complicated their process of acculturation in India. Till the advent of the Britishers, they had almost succeeded in maintaining equilibrium between their Parsi and Indian identities. Bapaiji represents the hybridized Parsi self evolved through the integration mode of acculturation into the Indian multi-cultural milieu during their pre-colonial phase in Indian diaspora. She belongs to an earlier generation of Parsees whose assimilation into Indian society resulted in deeper bonding with non-Parsi communities. The domineering temperament of Bapaiji is evident in her speech and conduct. In fact, it is due to her efforts that their racial history and culture dominate over her anglicized and westernized progeny, though she is the only lady in Navsari to have the feminist ideology and the first one to wear trousers. When Homi is baffled by the fleeting images of his memoscan and looks for the image of Candace Schmandace, his American girl-friend with which the memoscan had begun working, Bapaiji in a deep and proud voice tells him:

Look, no, what I am showing you? What is this Candace? a hair in your history. Pluck it out, throw it away. Bigbig brains you have got, but little sense. Just look, no, what I am showing you? (13).
But for Homi, Candace was the only one that mattered. The rest was silence. The irony is that history and race matter very little to the modern Parsee like Homi and he thinks that their Americanized life is also an important part of their history which is still becoming and happening. But he cannot counter-argue with his dominant Bapaiji who longed to be recognized by her Indian Parseeness. Bharucha comments:

This is not as paradoxical as it sounds. Membership in a wider identity does not necessarily exclude the narrower identity. In fact, only those like Bapaiji, who fully belongs to the narrower ethnic identity, can assimilate best into the macro level identity. Homi’s Bapaiji, the strong lady, a Parsi rooted in semi-rural Gujarat, is the ‘guide’ through the intricate maze of the collective unconscious. She is not just Homi’s past, she is the Parsis’ Indian link, she is symbolic of those first Parsis who had made a pact with Jadav Rana to embrace the Gujarati language, Indian dress and customs… (Bharucha, 1994: 77-78).

Bapaiji, active in local Navsari affairs, attends municipal meetings, leads marches, and has Hindu and Muslim associates, if not friends. She very shrewdly averts a Mandir-Masjid clash by deciding the exact in-between position of a garbage-box on accurately counting the steps. Such a simple and easy solution it was and more importantly either religious group easily accepted it just because Bapaiji was a respectable Parsee lady. Later, she herself said,

Anyone could have provided the solution, but it helped that so many came with me, also that I was a Parsi, not a Hindu or a Mussalman – and it helped even more that I was a woman. That just surprised them too much to argue (98).

As a Parsee, she is considered to favor neither the Hindu not the Muslim, so her word carries weight with both. It reminds us of the neutral role played by the Parsees at the time of Partition. This is the role the visionary Phirozshah Mehta had envisaged for the Parsees. But such Bapaijies are rarely found among the Parsees today. Not all the Parsees find it easy to maintain their neutrality amidst the multicultural social backdrop of India. Not only that but also their westernization enhances their insularity.
Most Parsees today are closer to Rusi, Homi’s younger brother, who is enchanted with all things western. The exalted ‘self’ of the Parsee during the British colonial rule did not get its much-coveted space even in England when the Thatcher Government in 80s closed its doors for all Asian immigrants. America and Canada are the new El Dorado for such Parsees who seek their recognition in the Promised Land. Both Homi and Rusi experience difficulties in being accepted by the White American society. The “ethnic anxiety” caused by the racial discrimination is faced by them; just as it is faced by Feroza in *Brat*. David changes his mind to marry her because of her ‘exotic’ Parseeness. Significantly, it is the same exoticism which attracts Horace and Percy to Farida in *Woman*. Though Homi and Rusi have been brought up in a completely westernized life-style in the upper class society of Bombay in India, they are as much the foreigners as is any other Asian. Homi’s affair with the American Christian girl Julie is broken up because he is not ready to yield to the hegemonic pressures of Christianity and cannot convert, though he is not a devout Zoroastrian. Homi’s attending all the Christian celebrations at Julie’s home just on the liberal and humanitarian ground is misunderstood. They are devout Christians and Julie cannot marry a ‘heathen’. The differences are insoluble as it happens in the case of Feroza too. Feroza and David get along well but the match breaks up due to the family’s rigid interference. Homi thinks that both the religions could be complementary to each other and neither of them needs to leave one’s own. Feroza and David had decided to be Unitarians but it did not work for their acceptability to Feroza’s family and community. This experience of break-up hastens the process of Homi’s self-knowledge and he becomes more aware of his religious identity. Rejecting Julie’s condition of embracing Christianity before marriage, he argues that it would not be real. His cosmopolitan 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, and Jains whoever chose to attend. I liked that. It did not make me a heathen.”

Homi tries to make her understand but cannot convince her that ‘other’ religions are equally good. When she asked the question, “What about the children?”, Homi quotes
a phrase from the Zoroastrian prayer, “Manasni, Gavasni, Kunasni”. It means good thoughts, good words, good deeds, the most desirable things to be taught to their children. But for Julie, everything is meaningless without the faith in Jesus. Homi tries to persuade her but in vain. He says,

I’m not saying I don’t believe in Jesus – but I believe in others also. Jesus would not want me to cut them all off. He is not such an egoist. He is Love. We must teach our children about Jesus (387).

And pat comes a sharp question from Julie, “And also about others?” Homi sees no reason for not teaching their children about “others”. Julie is not aggressive but silent for a long time. She cannot digest this kind of tolerance. But Homi’s stand on religious matters is very clear and pointed. She waits for Homi to change his mind but to no avail. Christianity, the religion of the colonizers, is part of the design of the Imperial ‘centre’ to marginalize the “others” and maintain its supremacy, very often even imposing proselytization. In matters of religion and faith, the Parsees have maintained a distance from others, though with due respect.

Though Homi is a westernized Parsee, his attitude towards life is characteristically Zoroastrian like Feroza who depends on her religion during the trials and tribulations of her life. In this matter of religious identity Homi and Feroza are diametrically opposite to Farida who never ever depends or even thinks of religion when struggling through life. She even rejects the privileges she has got of her community’s elite identity. The moral dilemma of Homi is very central to his narrative. His involvement with Candace leads to a moral crisis in his life. He is not able to put up with the rejection from her. He cannot digest that he is not acceptable despite his good self. It hurts him a lot and he resolves to annihilate himself: “If I wouldn’t be with Candace the way I wanted, I would be with her the only way I could by repeatedly reliving the memory of my night with her until it became my whole life (403). He tries to relive the moment of his union with Candace in order to reach the core of his being. In doing so he overworks his memoscan and chooses to die pathetically and foolishly. Slipping from the conscious memory to the unconscious, Homi has a brush with the collective unconscious which had shown him a way to control the past, at least in his imagination. Bapaiji, who is invisible, witnesses Homi’s attempt at self-immolation.
She reprimands him:

A drop of water can become lost in the Ocean: it can also become the Ocean. I am giving you the chance to become the Ocean. You were so obsessed with reliving the times you spent with your American muddum that you didn’t even care about the cost of yourself. You would have sacrificed your gift, the brain of an Einstein, for a muddum who slept with waiters and barkeeps (32-33).

What Bapaiji means to say is that Candace is good for nothing and is not worth wasting his whole life. Homi, at the end, learns to exercise control to prove to him that he was finally the master, no longer the slave, of what he chose to see. He then becomes the controller of his memoscan, and not its pawn. He learns to accept the glory of his past, the value of his own ‘self’, his own identity, religious, cultural, social and racial. He gains this self enlightenment and is re-born and regenerated into a new self. He has attained this heightened consciousness as a result of his tryst with the collective unconsciousness. What Desai seems to convey through the case of Homi is that the Parsees in the western diaspora have distanced themselves from their roots. They need to return to their pasts to recover their cultural identity. In the globalized present of the diaspora community such cultural recoveries become means of survival.

In the final visual image which captures the essence of the narrative, the Zoroastrian ancestors of Homi appear to bless him. He is overjoyed: “I had done it; I’d brought them all together in one place at one time, made a whole of the scattered pieces” (406). It is as if the fractured identity of the Parsees is reconstituted into a whole and integrated one. Thus Homi’s triumph lies in ‘connecting’ the racial past and present. The fleeting zigzag movements of the memoscan impart Homi with a stance that helps him explore all the facets of his identity, the various diasporas of the Parsees. Homi’s dialogue with the past holds the key to his existential dilemma. The fragmented pieces of his past build up not just his identity but also that of his race. After wandering in time and space and completing this exercise of identity-building, Homi is back where the roots of most Parsees exist – India. That is the concrete, visible reality – his ‘home’ in Bombay at India. This is where he could connect the most; this is where he feels he belongs to. He could easily relate to the place of his birth, the cosmopolitan Bombay where he had been groomed into a young man. The
crowing of the cock is a symbolic gesture in the narrative suggesting a fresh beginning in the protagonist’s life. There would soon be dawn suggesting the dawn of self-knowledge and the wisdom of the world. He is now free from the cyclic maze into which he was lost and was locked in by his memoscan. He gets a more balanced view of his own life and his own identity, after symbolically opening the window of his hospital-room to the pink sky of the dawn. He gets suffocated and feels claustrophobic in the closed, air-conditioned room. Feeling the cool freshness of the dawn, now his mind too is de-conditioned and open. His fragmentary existence ends with his firm resolve to lead a fuller and more meaningful life. This ending is very much similar to that of Journey where Gustad removes the papers from the ventilator to let the light come in.

Here, a valid point has been raised by V.L.V.N. Narendra Kumar who refers to the hypothesis of Wilson Harris, a West Indian novelist. Summing it up, Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin write:

First Harris has a profound belief in the possibilities of (Individual and Communal) psychic regeneration through catastrophe. By the transforming power of imagination, what appears to have been irretrievably lost may be recuperated – indeed in the very energy involved in violent and destructive acts reside the seeds of creativity (Ashcroft et al, 1989: 150).

“As Harris aptly points out, it is Homi’s imagination which acts as the ‘transforming power’ in the context. The violent act of Homi effects a ‘genuine’ change” (Kumar, 2002: 132).

Homi’s case is extraordinary and through him Desai conveys a message to today’s Parsee youth. Desai, an expatriate himself, had undergone similar humiliating experiences like Homi and Rusi who represent the Parsee youth. In delineating two different personalities of these two brothers Desai actually explores two possibilities of the immigrant experience. The boys represent two different realities and also the two sides of Desai’s own dilemma, his own psyche. The autobiographical element lends gravity to the situation faced by the Parsee youth today in the West. Rejecting their Parsee identity they choose to go and live in the West, but to the Westerners they are unacceptable as are other Indians – an identity they have never accepted while in
India. Similar kind of rejection by the British colonisers was faced despite their being so westernized. Homi could not digest such rejection by the westerners while Rusi could. Rusi becomes a bi-cultural and marries an American Jewish girl – Jan. It is Jan who spells out the advantages of bi-culturalism. She says it is the best thing because it armors one “from the abuses of patriotism – which are nationalism, insularity, myopia and that sort of thing” (344-45). According to Bharucha, this is ironic as Parsees like Rusi are already well-armed against patriotism and nationalism. She further states:

So the allegorical action of the novel is resolved into two distinct realities. The stay-at-home Parsi, attuned to an Indian existence and the Westward-ranging Parsi assimilated into the expatriate ethos. Both these Parsis, however, retain their Parsi identities (Bharucha, 1994: 79).

Despite the ‘ethnic anxiety’ they feel, the Parsee youth like Rusi and also Feroza and Manek in Brat prefer to settle down in the New Land that promises wealth and independence. Their existence in the New World becomes a process of acculturation leading to a quest for the new hybridized identity. The elite status so carefully nurtured in India crumbles in the face of western rejection. In a bid to salvage this superior position and pride for their special cultural heritage, Homi, who also faces a similar rejection, becomes eloquent on what he considers his trump card – the Zoroastrian religion. Like Feroza, Homi too, is a true Zoroastrian in his outlook and attaches paramount importance to “humata, hukhta and hvarshta”. He sets out to impress his American hosts by telling them about the ancient lineage of his religion. Zarathushtra’s value-based, this-world religion is expounded in considerable detail, in fragments, throughout the novel. The two best known Zoroastrian prayers are translated and their importance explained. This is the religious aspect of the Parsee identity. Though Boman Desai is a westernized Parsee like Mistry, Dhondy and Sidhwa, the worldview permeating this narrative is evidently Zoroastrian.

Rusi and Jan are not much worried about their children’s religion after their marriage as Feroza-David and Homi-Julie are. Jan Schultz is a Jew and has a quite a liberal attitude to life though not a casual one. She can accept the reality of life easily. Rusi tells her that some people wore their Americanism like a badge, but she slipped into it as easily as into a pair of blue jeans. The problem, which is very big for others generally, is no problem at all for Rusi and Jan who expect their child.
One development I thought was ironic actually. For a child to be born Jewish, the mother must be Jewish, but with us it is the father who must be a Zoroastrian. We talked about it -- no ‘bar mitzvah’ for the child and no ‘navjote’, only love, a good education, what else? The rest will take care of itself (345).

Even Homi is of the same opinion about his would-be children with Julie but she would not accept him unless he becomes a Christian. He tries to explain that the principles of all religions preach the same things and India is open to all good things of all religions. It is very significant to note here that Homi, here, represents the Indian multiculturalism based on secularism as against the America’s ‘multi-ethnic’ multiculturalism with a Christian hegemony, though like a so-called ‘salad-bowl’, is not yet completely unbiased and open to the other religions and cultures. In India too, there is the majoritarian domination at the national as well as the state level. The Hindu-Muslim clashes and the regionalist forces like Shiv Sena in Maharashtra tarnish the image of Indian secularism and mar the Indian multicultural ethos as is shown in Mistry’s novels. Homi, for the first time, feels proud of his ‘Indianness’ and its broad-minded tolerance. He, who had never paid attention to his religions identity so far, suddenly becomes aware of it and feels assertive about his roots when assaulted by the hegemonic pressures of his host country. India also had been his host country for more than a millennium but the Parsees had never felt such pressures for proselytization from the majority Hindu religion. Curiously, Homi, who does not much believe in any religion, now is firm and his unconscious belief asserts itself. It is now that he understands Rusi’s discussion about ethnic anxiety. The need to pressurize one to convert itself is an assault to the individual’s space and right of freedom. Deep within, he too is anxious to preserve his own culture and religion and would not give up for Julie’s love. In fact, his Parsee community is also not that liberal to accept their girls who marry outside. Feroza is as liberal in her thinking about religion as Rusi and Homi are. But even if a girl is ready to relinquish her faith, the faith is not ready to accept her in the fold. Because, Rusi and Homi are men, this issue does not apply to their case. Feroza had a traumatic and stressful experience about her prospective marriage with David and the issue could not be resolved amicably and resulted in a break up.
Both the boys, Homi and Rusi had never given a thought to their religious, cultural and national identities until a series of humiliating and discriminating experiences make them anxious about their ‘ethnicity’ which is no more a complimentary word in America. Like Desai himself, Rusi washed dishes in a cafeteria for a dollar an hour, not knowing that his employment meant depriving the local workers of their jobs. It is Jan who calls him a ‘scab’ and makes him realize how the Americans misunderstand him and hate him. Rusi felt a chilled shock when he was nicknamed a ‘scab’ and he did not know what he had done. He did not know what a scab was. He was called a scab because he had taken jobs from the people who needed them. Rusi tries to explain sincerely that he had no such intentions and he was just filling in the temporary vacancies till the American comes back and resumes. Jan is not ready to believe him. Rusi wanted her to like him. The encounter had shaken him because he did not want to offend anyone. But Jan does not want to listen to him. She says, “Look, this is nothing personal. I just don’t like foreigners coming here and interfering with the American process” (337).

The xenophobia of Jan represents the psyche of the Americans who are scared of the spectre of unemployment which in turn has led to defensiveness and a hunt for the victims amongst the immigrants. In the 1990s, the reordering of the capitalist economy adversely affected the security of the labour force. Watson states:

> The new demands of the system mean that there are no jobs for life. The impact of this has been hardest on the middle classes for whom unemployment, so long banished from their imaginative horizons, has now reappeared (Watson, 2005: 34).

This crisis, it is believed, has taken place due to the presence of the immigrants who are labelled as ‘second class citizens’. B. Ostendorf even views this situation in a slightly different way. He believes that this new set of labour arrangements is, in fact, associated with another phenomenon which exacerbates the situation, the so-called ‘Third Worldization’ of the First World (Ostendorf, 36-64). This critical situation consequently requires the government to redefine what constitutes the community of the nation-state. The multicultural policies necessitate reformulating the notion of national identity which will be more accommodative and take into account the changing global circumstances in which multinational economies operate.
The novelist has brought out the contrast between the two cultures of America and India. He felt more vulnerable to the identity crisis in Chicago than in Bombay. Rusi has become very uncomfortable with his identity as it had once happened in his school at Bombay. He had faced similar kind of derogatory nicknaming “stupid bloody bawaji bastard” (305) from one of his schoolmates Tonto. He had a literal physical fight challenging the boy and had emerged a winner falsifying the image of a ‘bawaji’ as a weakling. Rusi is more uncomfortable in Chicago compared to Bombay as he despaired about the understanding of the Americans calling him ‘scab’:

He hesitated to speak too directly because he felt himself too easily misunderstood, too easily drawn into explanations that would have been unnecessary in Bombay. He called it Ethnic Anxiety as if naming the problem were the same as solving it (336).

Even listening to music there among his student fraternity Rusi felt “‘out of place’, imagining they knew something he didn’t. He’d had some experience at ‘Just Folks’, his music-group in Bombay, had gained popularity … -- but the rules were different in America” (326). Among his Indian mates he felt that their presence provided too comfortable a refuge to mingle and he had chosen finally to go alone. Rusi wanted to come out of the comfort zone but soon became uncomfortable with the feeling of ‘difference’. Sitting in a corner of the Tep house Rusi “watched the girls in jeans, shorts, mini-skirts, culottes, halter tops, afraid his difference would make a difference to them, imagining they would not notice the difference if only he moved fast enough” (327). The alienation Rusi feels among his American group is not only embarrassing but pinchingly humiliating. Rusi could feel the disdain in their offensive looks because they were getting ripped off by the establishment and people like Rusi do not make it easier. To which Rusi explains:

.....and how am I supposed to know this? For you I am just a foreigner, something to occupy your free time to make you feel important, something to talk about when you go back to your own kind. For me, what a country this is -- everybody is a foreigner! (338).

Immigrants like Rusi are expected to take initiative from their side to get assimilated into the mainstream of the American life and society. This American process of
assimilation where culture acts as a melting pot is a one-way process. The onus to integrate is placed on the immigrants, and so is the blame for their failure to do so. The immigrants might take a step forward to integrate but if their efforts are not responded, then the result is difficult to achieve. Parekh states that “integration, frustrated as much by segregation as by rejection, is a two-way process, requiring both immigrants and the wider society to adjust to each other” (Parekh, 2008: 85).

While the law can tackle formal and institutional discrimination fairly well, the informal and subtle ways of discrimination are beyond its reach. There is no direct and foolproof way to deal with them. For instance, the shopkeepers might overcharge the immigrant customers or the fellow-passengers may make abusive remarks and change seats on a public transport or the immigrants have to unduly wait for a long time in a queue or even get humiliating treatment and abuse by the immigrant officers on the airports as it happens with Feroza and Yezad. Although such incidents are trivial, they might incite a little irritation, but cumulatively the hurt and the humiliation can be deeper and build up in anger and hatred. Parekh very clearly states:

Since these practices spring from and derive their legitimacy from the general social ethos, church leaders, government ministers, public figures and the media have a vital role to play in reforming the society’s moral culture. Ordinary citizens too facilitate integration by what they say and do, and it is their civic duty to play their part: in any society, the state is not and cannot be the only agent of social cohesion and harmony (Parekh, 2008: 90).

But Rusi is not a person to step back by rejection. He overcomes this acute feeling of alienation triumphantly winning Jan to marry him at the end. This requires extraordinary self-confidence and courage. Homi also showed this courage but was rejected by Candace. Even then Rusi expresses his sibling rivalry and feels envious of Homi for the attention he gets when he is stuck up with the machine memoscan. The novelist, too, gives Homi more attention as after all, Homi is the protagonist –

And now I’m making a life for myself with Jan, finally someone who gives a damn about me first - I mean, hell, we’re having a baby – and what happens? Homi has an accident with his machine, Homi has to be brought back to Bombay, Homi is back where he belongs, centre stage, and who cares about Rusi or his wife or his baby? (294).
Rusi, here, the mouthpiece of author, wants to convey that the youth like him who make efforts to assimilate and settle down in America are lost to their own people; they are neglected and forgotten but their brethren in India who stay held with their roots have been lauded and complimented.

Rusi, obliquely interrogates whether it is the only alternative to retain their Indian identity or the other possibilities are to be explored and the efforts of the formation of new identity through acculturation and hybridization in making of a cosmopolitan citizen have to be recognized and acknowledged. Homi, despite his being back to Bombay, his home, feels that his ambition still beckons him to America and he longs to be back to Aquihana. Hence, there are constant home-pangs for a modern Parsee youth who is never at home anywhere like Homi or is at home everywhere like Rusi. Through these two relationships of Rusi and Jan and Homi and Julia, the novelist gives glimpses into the American life, their attitude towards foreigners, especially Indians, and also reveals the inner recesses of the Parsee young mind of today. Though Parsees are liberal in their outlook, positive in their approach to new ways of life, highly westernized in their public life, they still retain their own identity and consider India as their own land. They are deeply conscious of the religious customs and traditions of their own community. At the same time, paradoxically, due to their history as the settlers they do not feel like being Indians as the natives do. What one needs to consider is that one should attach equal value and importance to all the other faiths and cultures too. There is no point in considering one’s own superior or inferior to others. The awareness of difference is acceptable but the tendency to believe that everything western is superior or that everything oriental is ‘exotic’ is not acceptable.

When Rusi lands in America it is so unbelievable to him that he repeats a number of times telling himself that he was in America, a heaven where everything is better than India:

Bombay might have had more people, but they seemed to be going in circles, Chicago had more cars and all seemed to be going straight to the moon, Bombaymen spoke with lilt, Chicagoan with command. God might have been everywhere in Bombay, but Chicago might have been God himself. Besides, there was nothing to compare in size to the black steel and glass John Hancock Tower, … resembling eerily what might have passed, in the twilight, for a postpostpostpost-contemporary, Twenty-first century, Castle Dracula (323).
Homi, the time-traveler, has traveled in time and space with the aid of his memoscan through various places in the world where his people had spent the important phases of their lives, i.e. Edinburgh, Cambridge, Hong Kong, Lahore, Darjeeling and of course, America. His father Adi and his Soli mama had their education at Edinburgh and Cambridge respectively. His Mom Phiroza and her sister Jalu masi had been groomed into the western lifestyle at Bombay as the girls belonged to the prestigious Cama family from Bombay. Jalu masi got married to Sohrab from Hong Kong. Granny, Homi’s maternal grandmother, feels that the years she spent in Cambridge when Soli studied there were the best and the happiest years of her life. Even Adi, Homi’s father, liked Edinburgh very much and was very much excited to study there:

Edinburgh is beautiful -- beautiful! I love Edinburgh. In this respect I suppose I am just like your Granny – her Cambridge is my Edinburgh, her Englishmen are my Scotsmen. Perhaps for you, though, never having lived in the United Kingdom, there is no difference between English and Scots (185-186).

And then there is a harangue of his appraisal of the Scotsmen; their comparison with the English and the long list of the Scottish genius, next to the Jews. He is full of awe and admiration for the people:

This is what I find so irresistible, this mix of elegance and savagery. Edinburgh is so manly, so noble and I was impressed even more by the people than by the city or the country. They were so fair-minded I could not believe it (189).

But Bapaiji, Adi’s mother, advises him to be wary of the English who seek divorce just for petty reasons. She thinks that the English are very nice people but not so nice to marry. She believes as generally all Parsees believe that Adi must marry a Parsee girl. In her typically domineering yet humorous tone she says, “You must marry a Parsi girl, you must stay with your own kind. Otherwise, you will never prosper. Otherwise, definitely, you will get divorce” (203). She cites a few examples of the English who were divorced. Defending his side Adi says that everyone is not the same. But still Bapaiji is very sure of the difference: “I am not saying they are all the same, they are not all the same, but they are all different from us” (Italics mine). They are all thinking differently from us” (203-4). And later, Adi too feels that she is right. Bapaiji is a different Parsee who feels proud of her Parsee-ness and Indian-ness and is
not swept away by the superiority attached to the English. She said the locomotives in India were just as fast and that she could cook better in her own kitchen than the Indian restaurant there. She felt proud for a Bombay Parsee who had erected a statue there and said that the Parsees were the tiniest community in the whole world but they were everywhere. Despite Adi knowing that Bapaiji was right in taking pride of their own people and country he could not help being taken away by whatever English / Scottish and rendered alienated and isolated at the end as back home, he would find very few people having his own kind of grooming. Adi, Homi’s dad, now the spirit, shares with him through the memoscan his ultimate decisive feelings about his fascination for the West:

There was no one thing that convinced me to return with Bapaiji, Homi, no single moment of truth -- I showed her Edinburgh, London, Paris, Rome, and Frankfurt -- but slowly I realized that outside of India I would always be a stranger. (Italics mine). Even with my superior education I felt inferior to Pamela, a landlady’s daughter, because she spoke better English. That was one thing that impressed me immensely about your mummy, her convent school education. Even your granny had had a convent school education -- in fact, they had both been to the same school. They both spoke English as if they had been born to it even though they were Parsis. One of the things I requested when I got here was the ability to speak the King’s English. The irony is, of course, that there is no one with whom I might speak it -- and even if there were, the medium of communication here is thought, not language. You would understand me clearly even if, as Bapaiji said, I spoke Zulu (205).

Desai raises a serious issue of learning one’s own native language and feeling proud about it through a minor character in the novel Mr.Popatlal, the Gujarati tutor of these convent going sisters, Pheroza and Jalu. Popatlal, who becomes Desai’s spokesperson, had joined the freedom struggle and gone to jail. The girls were surprised as they were fed by their mother that the British were good. All their English friends at school were good. So if the British put him in jail, then he must have done something bad. To this, Popatlal says that they are right and the British are good but sometimes the good people do bad things when they have a bad system. It is a bad system for one nation to rule another. He tries to explain to the bewildered little girls:

You girls are lucky to go to good school, a convent school, where you can learn good English and British History and all but you have to hire a tutor like me to learn Gujarati, our own native language and you learn nothing about our own Indian History except what the British are teaching you. Do you think this is good? That another county tells us what we should do? (208).
He meant to say that the school should give equal weightage to the cultural heritage of the native county along with the foreign one. It should arrange for the sitar lessons if there are lessons for piano, a western instrument. The girls’ father, Rustom Cama had insisted that his wife would give up playing sitar, an Indian instrument. The blind craze for the West in all matters have made the ‘Indian’ Parsees dependent on the alien culture though sometimes without relinquishing their own resulting into hybrids in the real sense of the term. The British exploited it to their full advantage. Homi’s Granny had experienced such slyness of the British when she was a young unmarried girl. She was cheated by Teddy, a lascivious Englishman whom she considered to be well-groomed and well-spoken. She tried her best to impress Teddy by appearing to be more Anglo than she was in her manners, speech and costume. Though later, she had doubts about his lustful advances, she did not want to sound like an “unsophisticated Parsee girl”. It is this faulty attitude of demeaning oneself, one’s own language, one’s own culture and one’s own country that makes it easy for the foreigners, the colonizers to rule over and prove their superiority. The mad rush to settle down at USA and the other western countries among the younger generation and their readiness for acculturization and assimilation are another forms of colonization, i.e. the neo-colonization of the territory of the collective consciousness of the people.

The willingness and readiness of the Parsee to be like the westerners and feel proud about that makes the process of assimilation easy and not very painful. Manek, in *Brat*, changes his Parsee name to an American one ‘Mike’ and would be happy to be called so by the Americans at his workplace because he thinks that it would bring the feeling of oneness with them. Similarly, Homi’s Granny, Meher Cama is full of awe and admiration for her English friends at Cambridge. Most of the women were widows like her – Agnes McGuiness, Muriel Fitzwilliams, Sarah Allsop, Nora Bomford and Iris Masters. All of them had been married to armywallahs and spent some time in India. That made their relationship more amiable apart from their being the partners in playing Bridge and Bezique. She recalls:

They called me Mary. Meher was too difficult. They kept calling me May-her, accenting the first syllable so ponderously that I had to correct them every time. Finally, Agnes McGuiness said, “why don’t we just call you Mary, my
dear, if it’s all the same to you.” Actually, I preferred it. It made me feel like one of them though they always deferred to my opinion when we dined at the Koh-i-noor or the Taj Mahal despite their own vast experience with Indian cookery and I continued to wear saris – I hadn’t worn a dress in so long I’d have felt uncomfortable (115).

This is absolutely ironic that Meher does not feel uncomfortable with her new name and accepts it so very willingly. It is, in a way, an assault on her identity by which she had been known to people since her birth, just as she has been comfortable with sari wearing it for years and would have felt – uncomfortable with a dress, but not with a new English name ironically. And that’s what makes the process of acculturation a partial one. In Woman Farida also prefers to wear sari in America and the western dresses when she is in Bombay. This is the typical psychological tendency of the Parsees of ‘othering’ themselves and gain attention that they are different from the mainstream Indians; they are Parsees. The Parsees had to adopt the Gujarati language and sari, the women’s costume so as to seek refuge in the new land. They have been a peace-loving community and they have assimilated in India to such an extent that they never think of themselves as other than ‘Indians’. But the truth of their being a diasporic community cannot be negated. Though their roots are in Persia, they have no land to which they can go back. Here in India too, their process of acculturation is not complete. They have retained their native Parsee ethnicity but their hybridity becomes much more complex in the situation of being in the double diaspora. Already faced by the identity-crisis throughout a millennium, it becomes more acute further when they cross the borders of India. Despite their claim in merging fully with the Indian mainstream long back, they had never wholeheartedly participated in the freedom struggle of India. Their patriotism has always been dubious and ambivalent; hence Desai refers to the great freedom fighter Dadabhoy Naoroji. Besides, his protagonist Homi belongs to the Seervai family which has produced nationalist lawyers and has the relationship with the family of the Camas who has been famous nationalists and industrialists. Their positive effort to adopt Gujarati traditions and become an integral and prosperous part of Gujarat, India, is fully explained. But at the same time, their leaning towards the West and thinking themselves ‘different’ from the natives very often surface in their attitude and life-style. Their respect for the Indian culture and tradition has not been so innate and spontaneous as it has been for the English or American. At Cambridge, Granny represents the community’s attitude
when she says about her English friends, “They looked out for me too. Being a foreigner I took the utmost care not to give offense …” (116). They are the foreigners in India too and have taken care not to offend their host people. But their prejudice for whatever Indian and their bias for whatever Western is evident in their life-style. When Meher alias Mary’s English friends found out that she once played sitar, Nora brought her a sitar her husband had brought from India as a souvenir. Granny tells Homi:

I hadn’t played the sitar since I’d been married because your grandfather Rustomji Jamshedji, whom you unfortunately never met, said it was a servant’s instrument. Good Parsis played only the piano or the violin. It was so silly; this pilgrimage to all things Anglo, but that is how it is with us Parsis. Jehangirji Kawasji Daboo named his daughter Bachubai Guinevere Pestonji insisting that her great aunt a few times removed had been an Englishwoman. He was too obsessed with his notion to recognize how the ridiculous juxtaposition of names had exposed his despair that he wasn’t English himself. Anyway, I was delighted to have the instrument and I played for them and even gave Nora some lessons, teaching her what little I knew about ragas and talas (116-17).

To use Novy Kapadia’s phrase ‘Parsi paradox’; it is very much obvious in their reluctance to accept the ‘Indianness’ and at the same time feel proud of it and defend it vehemently whenever assaulted, especially by the colonial hegemony. The young Granny shows Homi a small but suggestive incident happening during a public program in Bombay. She witnessed a minor confrontation a Parsee gentleman had with an Englishman due to his “imperial arrogance”. The Englishman wanted to remove a chair reserved for the Parsee’s friend for an English lady. The Parsee refused politely. It is revealed from their dialogue that the Parsees, despite their being in good books with the British and also being highly westernized, were treated like any other colonized Indian and they resented it. Their dialogue is as follows:

“Let go the chair,” said the Englishman.
“No,” said the Parsi. “It is you who must let go”.
The Englishman looked from the Parsi to his friend and back. “Who are you to speak to me like this?”
“We know our rights,” said the Parsi with the same politeness, the same unswerving gaze.
The Englishman might have backed off then if he could have saved face doing so, but it was too late. “I could have you confined for the night,” he said.
“That is a risk I will have to take”.

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Fortunately for everyone, a second uniformed Englishman called from a
distance,” It’s all right, Ian. We’ve got all the chairs we need” (133-34).

The first Englishman thumped the chair down without looking at the Parsees and
walked away. The Parsee put the chair calmly back where it had been, explaining
what had happened to his friend. Again paradoxically on the other side, Granny
thought to impress the English. Her mother had wanted her to wear a sari; it seemed
wanton for an eighteen year old to show her ankle and calves, but Granny insisted on
wearing a dress because she didn’t want the English to think she was old fashioned.
The contradictory attitude of these two Parsees to the English is noteworthy. These
two incidents focus on the identity-crisis faced by the Parsees. Despite their desperate
attempts like Granny’s to please them, they are treated like the other Indians and
meted out with bad treatment. Apart from the above quoted misbehavior, Granny too
is cheated by the Englishman Teddy, ironically with the help of Rustom’s cunning
sister Naju, a Parsee lady. It is noteworthy that this bitter experience with the British
does not disillusion Granny once and for all. In fact, her fascination continues as she
grows into a young lady.

Their happily content-in-themselves and non-interfering stance does not lend them
safety and security, especially during the disturbed time. The same kind of anxiety
and insecurity the Parsees felt during the Partition riots are felt during the Calcutta
riots in the pre-independent India. Homi’s mom despairs: “We have such a good
time, but all around us people are getting killed.” Expressing his fear of the unknown
and the uncertainty Dad rejoined, “-- but there is nothing we can do about it. Might as
well enjoy life while we can. Calcutta is not the best place to be in these times.
Tomorrow, it might be our turn” (256). Dismayed and horrified, Mom retorts, “Don’t
be silly, Adi. You mustn’t even say such beastly things. We must keep on praying for
the best.” Desai exposes the sham of his own community during such troubled times.
The Parsees were misunderstood for being passive onlookers when the country was
passing through the ordeal of Partition as also shown by Sidhwa in Man. Deasi
exposes the vain patriotism exhibited by his own people. He obliquely questions the
gravity of their concern for their ‘home’ country.
Homi’s Dad, Adi had faith in Gandhi who according to him was the only person who could stop the communal riots; and he prayed for his survival in the fasts. “Gandhi survived the fast which brought an end to the atrocities and mom Pheroza remembered her old Gujarati teacher, Popatlal Master, who had gone to jail for Gandhi. Gandhi was more than a man, a saint, the most Christ like figure in the world; she liked to think she would have gone to jail for him herself, but she was no Bapaiji. She did not think even Bapaiji would have gone to jail – except maybe for the publicity, for the column in the newspaper” (256-57). Unlike Sidhwa, Desai sanctifies Gandhi but like Sidhwa, Desai too exposes the paradoxical frailties and foibles of the Parsees. When Independence came, Mom and Dad, i.e. Pheroza and Adi were in Nagpur. They had been invited to government house for the midnight inauguration on August 14, 1947. Mr. Pakvasa, the first Indian governor-to-be was late. Adi was irritated for such unpunctuality which had been unheard of during the Raj. When the National Flag was raised and “Jana Gana Mana” was sung for the first time in public, the tears of ‘pride’ rushed in Pheroza’s eyes. Both of them were very ‘proud.’ One wonders if it is indeed the ‘pride’ for the ‘Home’ country of such a westernized diaspora. The fake and genuine feelings are intermingled in a way so as to result into bi-loyalty and ambivalence. Their loyalty is divided between the Indians and the British generating the ambiguity. The sensitive Pheroza sounds genuinely pained by the Partition carnage and the cost the country paid for independence. “Mom’s tears developed into a monsoon and a deluge of blood, flooding the carnage in a crimson wash. “Jana Gana Mana” dissolved into a squawk of feedback over the loudspeakers, rose into a wall of lamentation. On a thin mattress, on a hard floor, in a dark house, somewhere in Calcutta, Gandhi curled like a worm on his side, shoulders shaking, weeping silently, this was not the conclusion he’d dreamed for his nonviolent revolution” (258).

The ambivalence, resultant of the typical Parsee paradox, is underscored when on one hand, Mom is ready to go to jail at the call of Gandhi and on the other hand, she insists that Dad would leave his Job in the army as it involved a lot of traveling. She is bored of so much of roaming and wants a stable and settled life with the children growing up. Adi is reluctant to leave his army job that he loves very much. He surrenders to the greater of his two loves. But it seems that the sporadic patriotic impulse of Pheroza was a sham as she is not ready to make do with the given situation
for the sake of her husband’s happiness, selfishly thinking of her own; and patriotism requires selfless sacrifice. Adi tries to explain her by reminding her of the advantages and perquisites of the army job. But to all of Adi’s arguments Pheroza has the answers. Adi tries his best to convince her:

One more thing you should think about, Philly. It is because of the army that we meet the people we meet. When Bapaji got me into the Maharaja’s employment in Baroda I was so bored. I had a bungalow and servants and good wages, but there were not many Englishmen or Parsis around, mostly just vegetarian types. The social life was like nothing to what we are now accustomed. We would have to start out all over again. I think you would like that even less (259).

But Pheroza is not going to be easily convinced. She says, “Bombay is not Baroda. There are plenty of our type of people there. (Italics mine) We would soon find our place” (260). It is evident from this dialogue that Parsees are more comfortable with their own kind, and ill at ease with those ‘other’ kinds of Indian people who are different from them. But they could get along well with the English as they thought they were of their type and could be attuned to their life-style and culture. Though the British extended their due respect and consideration for this highly westernized community and its contribution to various walks of the Indian society, they did not have the same affinity as the Parsees had for them. For the British the Parsees were like the other colonized Indians.

The Parsees felt the affinity with the British, may be because they found their religions as complementary to each other. Desai, too, wants to draw the readers’ attention to this point by bringing in the highly esteemed among the Parsees, Jalbhai Pherozshah Cama, “JP himself”. He is the other ancestor whose emergence out of Homi’s spiritus mundi is a revelation. When he spoke, Homi recognized his voice from the time he had heard him speak, holding on to the chair he had reserved for his friend while the uniformed English official tried to take it away. That dwarfish Parsee was none other but Jalbhai Cama himself, the first major industrialist of modern India. He tells his great grand nephew Homi about his ennobling exercise at Jerusalem where he had been on a sightseeing tour once. There he was impressed by the sight of some nails, reputedly the nails with which Jesus Christ had been crucified. He relates this to a concert he attended. It was a piano recital and the artist performed
Beethoven’s thirty-three variations on one theme. He was not much impressed, as he preferred the sonata form where a single theme is explored and developed to its fullest. But watching the nails he realized that variations too are a form of exploration and development. Jalbhai Cama’s profound observation hastens the process of Homi’s self-knowledge:

Christanity became relevant as a variation on the theme of Zoroastrianism. Each was profound by itself, but their conjunction provided a breadth 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 tangible place as Bapaiji, Granny and your pappa have imagined, recreated to suit their own needs. It is a state of mind encompassing all these possibilities – (169).

Homi, who is regarded as a “heathen” by Julie, realizes that Zoroastrianism and Christianity could serve as complementary. Again at another point Desai brings in this argument of Zoroastrianism as a theme on which various religions developed. When Homi lands in America it is Dale Schweppenheiser who receives him on the JFK Airport in New York. Dale welcomes him to Pennsylvania, the land of “Universal brotherhood”, himself volunteered to become Homi’s big brother. Homi understood later that Dale called him “Brother” because he imagined that Homi was his brother in Christ, but at that time he thought that Dale was speaking as a member of the university’s Big Brother program. Dale, who studied theology, asked Homi if he was a Christian. Homi replies: “I was born a Parsi: My religion is Zoroastrianism – but I am not devout. I believe in God, but not too much in any religion” (369). Dale knew of Zoroaster, older than all the prophets of the Old Testament, and of his religion which had influenced Judaism, and consequently Christianity, indirectly Islam. Jews also had been influenced by Zoroastrians and until their contact with the Zoroastrians, there was no mention in the Jewish texts of Satan, of a Savior, the last judgment, resurrection, free choice, and the immortal soul, among other similarly familiar notions, all derived from Zoroastrianism. Dale’s understanding of the aspects of Zoroastrianism which had influenced the West had outstripped even Homi’s. Later he invites Homi to their “Community of the Spirits” for which one does not have to be a Christian. Everyone is welcome. It is this all encompassing spirit which is the spirit of multiculturalism, i.e. the spirit of humanism and cosmopolitanism where it is the person who is of value and not his religion or creed or class or region.
Desai, a proud Zoroastrian, seems to convey that Zoroastrianism has an all encompassing spirit from which all other religions seem to have sprung or in other words all of them merge into one, the ancient-most Zoroastrianism. In the epilogue, Homi gathers all his present family with its cosmopolitan friends and the ancestors’ right from the “Shahanshahs eran ud aneran” standing in rows as if in a photograph. “Everyone got up to give me an ovation; behind them, above them, all around them, a light like a halo, ethereal, ineffable, the presence of Zoroaster conferred a blessing. I’d done it: I’d brought them all together in one place at one time, made a whole of scattered pieces” (406). Desai, through Homi and his memoscan, takes resort of memory, the collective memory and goes back in History, into the distant past to the first light of knowledge spread by the prophet Zoroaster. Homi, like Feroza in Brat, ultimately resorts to Zoroastrianism and understands its worth, of which a Parsee must feel very proud. This brilliant image captures the essence of the narrative. Homi succeeds in connecting the past and the present. It is the racial past which guides his present and resolves his existential dilemma. He feels lost in America and is confused as to where his ‘home’ is, Aquihana or Bombay. The detailed Zoroastrian history is juxtaposed with the crisis of identity of the Parsees themselves who are in a quest for ‘home’. It is the eternal quest of man to put down his roots somewhere, to possess some point of space to which he can relate emotionally and psychologically. Thus, for Homi, ‘home’ is not a quest for spatial identity but a search for roots. Suggestively, Homi is nicknamed ‘Home’ by his friends. His realisation that he is an inseparable part of the Zoroastrian race not only brings solace to his splintered self but also resolves his existential stalemate. Prophet Zoroaster confers his blessings on him after he is reborn, though symbolically. Thus, in the evolution of Homi’s consciousness, the racial past becomes the key determinant.

Knowing the limitation of human memory which can go back, at the most to the last generation, it was nearly impossible for Homi to recall any more backwards than his childhood memories of his parents and grandparents. To overcome this hitch, Desai has successfully employed the technique of memo-scan to invoke the racial collective memory and has taken the readers as far as possible in the past. And so Desai could connect not only the ancient history of the conquests, defeats and persecution of his race but could also connect to the fragments of the Indian history as the ancestors of
Homi narrate their tales to him. Homi, the protagonist, comes to know how Bapaiji, an independent and strong-willed Parsee lady, was in the good books of the Maharani of the Gaekwad family of Baroda (79-86). She used to call on Bapaiji due to her good will as a prominent social worker. The philanthropy and social contribution of the Parsees has always been noteworthy and has gained them high esteem and reputation in Indian society. Also, Adi, Homi’s father, narrates his life-experiences and reminisces the first day of free India when he and Homi’s mom Pheroza had been invited for the midnight inauguration of the new governor (257). Adi was irritated when the new governor to be sworn-in was late to turn up for the formal ceremony and he cannot help praising the punctuality of the British. Both of Homi’s parents participated in the function with the all-time Parsee anxiety about their position in the changing socio-political scenario of the country. Such bits of colonial and postcolonial history of India form the part of the reminiscences of Homi’s parents and grandmas. The narratives of history and memory meet in the novel. The common individuals’ personal lives are never isolated from the socio-political history of the time.

Diaspora per se is the narrative purpose of Desai’s Elephants. Parsee diaspora in India or in America or in any other country must preserve their ethnic identity. Bapaiji is a combination of prudence and sagacity whose fruitful assimilation into the Indian ethos is a singular achievement. She preserves her ethnic identity even after becoming an integral part of Indian life. Indian multiculturalism based on secular discourse is open, generous and uninterfering in the beliefs and family life of the Parsees. Desai brings back his protagonist Homi and his brother Rusi to India to send a message to all Parsees that they need not feel lost anywhere in the globe or feel baffled about their ‘home’. India is their home where their roots are. Despite the uneasiness caused during the post-colonial period by national majoritarianism, as narrated in Mistry’s novels, before the Parsees moved to their western diaspora, the process of rethinking and reexamining has continued. Homi and Rusi keep conveying that they are Indians though their religion is Zoroastrian. Both of them continue to follow their own religion even when they are fully westernized. It is on the one hand the ethnic anxiety of the Parsees for their community and religion since the community is getting slimmer; and on the other hand, Homi’s unconscious state serves as a metaphor for the collective unconscious of the Parsee community as portrayed by Desai in the
novel. It is the story of the community and the real protagonist is the community to reiterate the statement of Dr. A. K. Singh. Desai attempts to redefine the Parsee anxiety of existence and survival. Indira Bhatt sums up,

Desai seems to affirm that the globe-trotting Parsis have left far behind their origin and must think in terms of India and their community in India. Their Indian stay is the only reality and they have no distinct identity vis-à-vis the place of their origin in Iran. In fact, they have turned their tradition and religion into their territory. To this territory they belong (Bhatt, 2001: 232).

The Parsee creative 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. The writers of Indian Diaspora like Boman Desai, Firdaus Kanga, Rohinton Mistry, Farrukh Dhondy and Bapsi Sidhwa attempt to analyze the anxiety they feel of loosing their own ethnic identity. V. L. V. N. Narendra Kumar rightly points out about Desai:

Here racial memory acts as the means of spiritual reintegration. Memory becomes a timeless device for free association and synthesis of the diverse narrative strands. Here, quite significantly, the memoscan is sufficiently “humanized”. To this extent, what is dreary history becomes the much realized racial memory, tempered with values. Thus, ‘Desai’s narrative technique has far-reaching implications; it is a recurrent synthesis of the supposed “history” and the timeless memory. The use of “memory” as a means of intense self-discovery has many “Human Consequences”. Unlike Rushdie’s olfactory sensory trapdoor 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 memoscan perform a “human” function. It is our dream realized, as much as a fact, drawn from the timeless history of the racial unconscious. Thus, here, Boman Desai achieves a singular effect of unifying the aspect of identity in the timeless medium of memory. For once, the technique revivifies the theme and this is the greatest achievement of Boman Desai as a novelist (Kumar, 1999: 304).
ASYLUM, USA

Most of the novels of Boman Desai deal with the latest phase of the identity-crisis that the Parsee community is currently undergoing. The post-colonial and the post-modern dimensions of this issue can be comprehended thoroughly only with reference to the colonial and pre-colonial phases of the construct of their identity, especially in the context of the multicultural Indian milieu. The issue becomes much more problematic when this diasporic community in India, settled for more than a millennium, crosses the Indian borders and becomes the part of the Indian Diaspora abroad in the myriad multicultural milieus of other countries, mainly Canada, USA, and UK. Among the Indian English diasporic writers, a significant and impressive contribution has been made by the Parsee writers like Mistry, Kanga, Sidhwa, Cawasjee, Desai and a few more. These writers have undertaken the double responsibility of focusing on their social problems and also reiterating their identity. The Elephants directly addresses the question of Parsee identity with the aid of memory and history. A historical dilemma, trauma and identity-crises arose when they were expelled from their own land Persia and also during the Partition of India. Sidhwa’s Eaters and Man bring out this dilemma very precisely. Her Brat goes with Desai’s Elephants (1992), Asylum (2000) and Woman (2004) as all the four deal with the critical phase of the identity of the community that undergoes its second diasporic settlement.

The Parsee story is filled with pathos because of their long delayed recognition and the emptiness of the promise made to this colonial elite community whose fragile image is full of paradoxes and dilemmas. The majority of Parsee literature is concerned with ethnocentrism and insularity caused by centuries-long uncertainties and insecurities due to their co-existence with dominant ethnic communities. The texts of the Parsee writers first try to create a space for themselves within the dominant culture of the land. No effort is spared to assert their ethno-religious identity. The novel like Elephants not only traces the past history of the elite families of the Seervais and Camas but also the saga of the Parsee community as a whole and at one point the community itself becomes the protagonist. Asylum is a novel of different type and denominations. In this novel too, memory plays a role but it has got not much to do with the history and the collective unconscious of the Parsees. It does
have much to do with the quest for identity that its protagonist Noshir undertakes and gains the self-knowledge through his process of settlement, assimilation and acculturation in the alien land. Here too, like in Memory, Desai imparts certain autobiographical touches and Noshir is none but his self-image. A diasporic identity is the outcome of an intersection of cultural and historical forces. Coomy Vavaina very well analyses the situation of diasporic writers represented through their protagonists in their works:

Memory plays a crucial role in the works of postcolonial writers for it has “a potentially kinetic quality” (Philip 19) impelling both the writers and their readers to action. By confronting “the amnesia of colonialism through the memory of post-colonialism” (Hutcheon 89), postcolonial writers combat their erasure and write their communities into being. The works of postcolonial writers, whose identities are hyphenated, though similar in some ways, sharply differ from those who write from within their own cultures. The hyphenated positions of the diasporic writers cause their writing to abound in paradoxes, uncertainties and an overwhelming sense of irretrievable loss. The hyphen problematizes the situating of the subject as both ‘here’ and ‘there’. Under the guise of empowering people coming from different ethnic backgrounds and encouraging them to preserve their culture, the hyphen also “disempowers them, it makes them, to use a hyphenated term, empowering – disempowered.” (Mishra 10). Boman Desai, who emigrated to the United States of America from India, endorses Mishra’s views when he says: “As a hyphen I have more choices, but the trick is to narrow choices. Too much choice…… induces more paralysis than action (The Times of India 9) (Vavaina, 1996: 330).

America is a land full of opportunities and freedom. Everything is possible here. Noshir, Desai’s mouthpiece, talks about the pattern of life in America. The novel is about a Parsee young student from Bombay, Noshir Daruwala who goes to America to study engineering like many Indian students go to this land of promise for higher studies. The incidents of the novel are thought-provoking. They generate ideas regarding America as well as insights into life. Noshir marries a lesbian American girl Barbara to get a green card and becomes a citizen of America. He is under the threat of being deported as he is not able to pay the fees for his education. His marriage to Barbara is a marriage of convenience and he pays her for helping him in getting the green card. When he decides on his plan, he gets very much excited and thinks, “Everything was permitted because I had given myself permission. What a world!” (37). There were the strange things to take pride in. When Noshir observed the queen crowd collected at the City Hall for marriage, he said, “What a crowd! I was scared,
also so damn proud” (37). Everything and everyone is liberated. Noshir’s parents could not have dreamt of what their son did. But then, too much of freedom is also not easy to digest. Just after marriage Noshir’s bride Barb tells him, “you know husband, you can bring girls home if you want to. I know, wife, I said” (41). And Noshir had to learn not to mind. Then Noshir meets Blythe who fascinates him but she has a boyfriend Lex. And so the life of Noshir moves on to Brij and Sheila and Lisa and Sally and so on. “It was part of the great love experiment begun in the sixties and I was eager to join, eager to be as cool as everyone else, proud of Blythe’s ex-lovers, proud of the number of her ex-lovers as of the greater the number, the greater her desirability and the prouder I now living with her” (91). At one point Noshir is managing both Barb and Blythe because he wants to keep his options open. One evening he takes out Barb; the other evening Blythe. The institution of marriage loses its sanctity and worth. To be possessive about one’s partner is considered to be a negative trait but to give and get space to this extent of liberatedness leaves a question mark in Noshir’s Indian bred mindset. One has no right or authority over one’s mate. Noshir gradually learns not to mind but he cannot help it. He does not want Blythe to go with Lex but he fails to stop her. And the result is the façade of happiness devoid of the sense of fulfilment for the genuine attachment.

The extent of Lisa’s liberatedness is flabbergasting. As their stormy relationship progresses, it slowly dawns upon Noshir that Lisa wants to leave him. She prefers Jim who is making more money than Noshir and is better established. When everything is over between her and Noshir it is difficult for Noshir to recover from the break-up. One thing keeps on nagging him, “I couldn’t believe she could stop loving me so suddenly, so irrevocably, I couldn’t believe she could love someone else so intensely, at least not concurrently, I couldn’t believe anyone could” (221). Whatever affairs and infatuations Noshir has, his beloveds have a number of lovers and Noshir is always the one among many. Easily living with a number of relationships only shows spiritual and emotional vacuum in one’s mind. The relationships without any sense of responsibility or commitment sound hollow. Noshir realizes this slowly but surely:

There was a hole in her she didn’t know how to fill, and the same hole in me…. There was a hole in me, yes, but more than a hole, a vacuum, a suction, a black hole, and the night provided the illusion that I could fill the hole with Sheila (140-41).
The Indian reader is bewildered and amazed by such magnitude of liberatedness when living together without marriage or open marriage system in which any partner could come in or move out according to her or his wish. It may look fascinating and magnetic for a while but finally ends with a feeling of worthlessness and hurt self-esteem. Such superficial relationships leave an individual dried up and emptied of emotions and all that is humane. This brings us to a very major question of love and marriage in America. Instead of nurturing an individual it dehumanizes and drains one. Individuals are reluctant to commit themselves for life. Again and again, we are confronted with sentences like, “he is never going to leave me I fear.” Generally, such trust and confidence can be the source of immense peace of mind and the sound base for the institution of marriage but here Blythe fears that Noshir is never going to leave her and Lisa is scared that Jim may always cling to her. Barbara calls America “Disneyland”, Noshir’s brave new world, but shallow and artificial one. “The infrastructure of Disneyland was too powerful, it allowed no differences and it stilled shame, sorrow, loneliness among those who differed, but once you’d embraced the infrastructure you were welcomed back like the prodigal son as if the formal hypocrisies of law, religion and socialization were any less onerous” (114).

Desai states the long list of reasons for marriage and in it; love comes at the very last (85). He wants to suggest that it is least for the love that the Americans marry. As a result of the openness to the extent of promiscuity regarding relationships we have amazing structures and patterns of mating -- one man and one woman, one man and more than one woman, one woman and more than one man, one man with one man, one woman with one woman and so on and on. About his own marriage Noshir says, “Months after I married I slept with my first woman, not my wife, years after I married I slept with my wife” (166). Another lady Carrie with whom Noshir shares accommodation is living away from her husband to save her marriage. She saves her marriage in this manner for six years and finally when she moves in with her husband, her marriage breaks within six months. Shubha Tiwari comments:

A deep sorrow seems to be part of the American life. There seems to be a widespread ‘no one cares for me’ syndrome. Everyone seems to be crying for a soul-mate, desperate for someone to understand them…. Everyone seems to be
an extremist in one’s own way - nudism; lesbianism, feminism etc. mar the fabric of harmony (Tiwari, 2003: 141).

There is a big sociological and cultural gap between the two multicultural countries, India and USA. Noshir knew his parents and grandparents back in Bombay would find it hard to accept his marriage with an American lady and that too in the situation in which it had taken place. They wished him well but Noshir could not send them the photograph of his ‘wife’ Barbara and they guessed that she could be a black American whom they might not approve. First, Noshir finds it amusing but it was not that funny. Desai comments elaborately on the colour consciousness of the people, not only of Americans but Indians and Asians too for that matter. He calls it a ‘beast’ in the human psyche and the “skin cancer for which no doctor will find a cure, for which the cure is under our skin” (86). Noshir’s grandparents passed this colour complex to his parents and there on to the next generation. Noshir is kind and forgiving his elders for their complex as it is found everywhere universally. “Everyone wants to feel superior to someone. Even blacks subscribe to hierarchies of blackness. Why are blacks more than browns or olives or yellows or whites at the bottom of society’s totem pole?” (87). There is no answer to this question –

If I were to marry a black woman, it would not be without thinking; but she is Black! And how am I going to explain this? Perhaps the liberalization process progresses with generations. My grandmother would not have allowed such a marriage, my father would have needed an explanation, my child will not have to provide an explanation and so on until perhaps a twenty-first century descendent will emerge enlightened enough to recognize that the darkness under which his forebears labored was darker than their pigmentation, enlightened enough not only not to recognize gradations of pigmentation but not even to see them, enlightened enough to be blind, perhaps less an unlikelihood than might once have been imagined in this late browning America where diverse ingredients continue to find their way into the stew (87-88).

Desai, through his spokesperson Noshir, talks to his readers about racism and hopes for the enlightened future generations that it would be more humane and logical in their approach to the colour of skin. The multicultural America becomes browner and browner day by day as more and more Asians and Africans pour in.
The browner the stew the sooner we can look toward the moon and Mars as a family, toward the moon and Mars for the aliens until we become enlightened enough to be blind even to their alienness, and America provides more possibilities for such a stew than any other country in the world…He is not a nonracist who says he is a nonracist. He is a nonracist who doesn’t know he is a nonracist….. Respect the man, not his racism and there is hope (88).

Going to the root of racism and cautioning the mankind against its evil outcome Desai cites Nietzsche and says that if we succeed in making people hate themselves we will have to seduce them into loving themselves again or we will all become victims of their revenge and end up in the annihilation of each other. The eradication of racism will not mean the eradication of strife; racism has less to do with colour than with class, status, inequality, insecurity – less to do with anything than with lack of love. Pinpointing at the Parsees’ craze for white colour and their feeling of superiority while siding with the British, Desai laughs at his own kinds for their foolishness. On his behalf, Noshir says,

At the moment of truth the joke was on us, on all of us Indians who laughed with the English at the expense of other Indians, we were laughing at ourselves, victimizers and victims at once, because while we might have laughed with the English at the babus, the natives, we could never be the English, only sad English wannabes. We’re all schmucks. We’re also all beautiful. It’s up to us which way we want to go and I want to get out of this thicket (89).

Desai, here, touches very crucial point of Parsee uneasiness at their ridiculous make-belief of superiority over the natives. Neither do the British consider them to be their likes. So, their position is nowhere; at neither side. It is just in a limbo, a very awkward and uncomfortable position. Ultimately, they have to live with their co-existent natives, the Indians; but they have never felt one with them, despite their assimilation into the local culture to certain extent throughout the millennium. The point of problem is that the adoption and acculturation process for the Parsees has taken place into both the English and the Gujarati culture. In the postcolonial scenario and especially during the decolonising process in the country, they feel the push from the centre to the margins. It makes them uneasy in their own ‘home’ country India, of course an adopted one and leaves them with no option but to be loyal to their host culture. Looking at the history of the communal riots in the otherwise tolerant and egalitarian Indian multiculturalism and also pondering on the role the religion plays in
the Indian party-politics and the identity-politics of the minorities in India, the Parsees, being the most miniscule minority, feel anxious and insecure. The secessionist party-politics shaking the secure minority status in the Indian Constitution and betraying the democratic values of the nation-state has given rise to the insecurity, disrespect and despise for the minorities in India. Such discomfort has been very well expressed in the fiction of Mistry, Sidhwa and Desai. Though theirs being a very peace-loving community compared to other minorities in India, they are not free from the anxiety of being exiles in this country. Hence, many Parsees, from the progressive locale of the cosmopolitan and westernized Metro Bombay, join the recent trend of immigration for better education and job prospects. The option for this voluntary exile and twin displacement still does not resolve the issue of anxiety and discomfort. They are still not at peace with themselves despite being relocated twice. They are considered among the group of the people of Indian origin or recognized as the South Asians who add to the brown colour of the American stew, despite their being fair skinned. They become one more ingredient in the ‘salad bowl’ of the American multiculturalism. The diverse and heterogeneous American culture again thrusts them to the margins with many more. Hence, Desai’s call for humanism and hope, love and respect for man and not his racism which has less to do with colour than with class, status, inequity and insecurity. Noshir has got the green card, but whether he has got love and happiness is a big question. Like Rusi in Elephants, he too overcomes the ‘ethnic anxiety’, the hurt of rejection and racism and struggles to settle down.

Every liberal society has its own orientation and distinct flavour of its ‘liberalism’. A liberal society is generally based on a widely shared culture or the worldview and a resultant consensus on the meaning of human activities and relationships, the nature and content of morality etc. Although all liberal societies share certain common values, their cultural differences lead them to interpret and relate these values differently and hence illustrate the liberal maxims in their own unique ways. Parekh discusses this issue:

Since the rationalist liberal ignores culture and sees liberal society as articulated in terms of universal principals and local customs, he runs into intractable problems when confronted with a multicultural society some of whose members do not share liberal values (Parekh, 2006: 359).
Such members are immigrants, especially the conservative Asian immigrants, who come from different cultural and religious backgrounds and do not share the liberal society’s culture including some customs and values. Yet they are expected to be tolerant and respect them. To make them do so, the liberal needs to give them convincing reasons. According to Parekh, these reasons are of two kinds:

So far as local customs are concerned, he argues that this is how we do things here. And so far as moral values are concerned, he aims to give reasons that are compelling or at least powerful enough to secure the assent of immigrants (Parekh, 2006: 360).

Disagreements and conflicts here run deep and cannot be resolved easily. So, the rationalist liberal is in a moral dilemma. His difficulty is that he does not have good reasons for holding these values. The perplexity prevails as the immigrants see them as unreasonable and irrational.

After five years when Noshir visits his home in India, he expresses his unsettlement:

Bombay again. How it had changed, but it hadn’t. I had, and my perceptions. There’s a book here but this isn’t it. I grinned meeting my parents again, shook my father’s hand, bore my mother’s embrace: after five years I could manage no more. In me there was a hole big as Jupiter; between my father and me a chasm wide as space – which is again another book, and again this isn’t (167).

Noshir could not disclose what he was doing in America, sleeping around with American girls after his contract-marriage for the green card. He resolved to be a model son during his visit and this resolve was compounded by their resolve to be model parents, proud that their son was in America. It is a status symbol for which they were ready to compromise at any length. Noshir says about his father:

He wanted a son in America because that put him ahead in the rat race, being the first, like putting a man on the moon. All his friends were planning to have sons in America. Then if someone asked Do you have any kids? You could say I have a son in America, as if you had a super son. He wanted a son in America. Who can blame him? I wanted to come to America. Who can blame me? I told you. Everyone wants to come. Everyone came. Germans, Irish, Swedes, Italians, Mexicans, Asians – except Africans who were dragged, but if they had not been dragged chances are they would have come independently (21).
So this is how the American multicultural milieu has been formed attracting the people from the world over to its El Dorado. Noshir and his family, quite well off in India, had to face the problems of money to send Noshir to America. Noshir, who was rich in a poor country, came to a rich country to be poor. He quotes Milton’s Satan to Barb, “it is better to reign in Hell than to serve in Haven, but I don’t know ….. Don’t get me wrong. I am not saying India is Hell. It’s more spiritual country than America” (17). Barb is curious to know more about India. Noshir replies answering the ‘whys’ of Barb:

Such a patient country it is, such an accommodating country, always willing to suffer fools gladly, but such a difficult country to live in.
Why difficult?
So much heat, so much chaos, so much insecurity, such an inferiority complex
I think sometimes.
Why an inferiority complex?
It’s a question of history. For too many years, too many centuries, if you weren’t British in India you were less than British (17-18).

It was more difficult for the Parsees to decolonize compared to other natives. They could not easily digest their socio-cultural condition in the post-colonial free India.
Noshir’s family was doing just okay, was not among the ‘rich’ rich in India. It was the best thing for him to come to America but the situation here too was not much different. It would have been better if his father had afforded it but he was too frustrated in his own life, despite being too good for his own good, to expect less than the most for his son. Like Rusi, Noshir too reflects certain autobiographical traits of Desai who had to be through all kinds of petty jobs to earn his living in America.
Noshir despairs,

You might wash dishes…you might be a janitor, you might be without money, but if you were in America you were somebody -- a myth, may be, yes, of course, but THE myth about America. Up to me now, start from scratch, ball in my court (21).

Similarly, the myth about India in America is, as Barb believes, it is mostly “a country of cows and the caste-system” and black magic and snake charmers – “but also of history, ancient history” (15). Indian history is the history of invasions and the British,
the last invaders. Along with the material richness, the original Vedic Indian culture, much older than the American, too was assaulted by the multiple cultures of the invaders.

Noshir learns the lessons of life the hard way. The Darwinian law rules the world, survival of the fittest; and he was not among the fittest. He lost Lisa because he had no secure future. He lost the battle to Jim simply because he was not yet an engineer and not earning handsome. It was the hard reality that Lisa had always Jim to support her but Noshir was all alone in a foreign land. He analyses his pain and the cause of it from different angles. He has got to be practical and decides to resume his studies. Noshir’s parents had sent him to the States for status symbol and there are many parents who use their children for their own ambitions. Some realise their mistake very late or may be never. But then life is always incomplete and Desai turns quite philosophical about the truth of life:

Paradoxically it is perfect because it needs improvement, if it needed no improvement it would be dead….It is subtlety, not certainty, that makes the truth beautiful. When its focus is just off centre, when it catches you by surprise, when it refuses to be taken for granted, when it refuses to be defined, when it demands an element of faith, then is the truth most beautiful (249).

After all this painful thinking, Noshir’s process of Americanization is complete. Even his name is changed from Noshir to Riff because he plays the guitar riffs. His mother proudly declares his American name to his friends in Bombay. Just as Manek in *Brat* and Meher, Homi’s granny in *Elephants* preferred to be called by their westernized names Mike and Mary respectively, Noshir also has taken to the American identity completely so much so that he feels to be an American in the true sense when his parents visit him in Chicago. When Noshir expresses that Chicago is home for him and he loves it, his mother said, “Nonsense, Bombay will always be your home.” Noshir replies:

I have a great affection for Bombay, but Chicago is the city where I found myself. It is my city.
It was a revelation for me as much as for them. They loved Chicago and I loved showing it to them, but I hadn’t realized until I showed it that it was my city. I was home, they were visiting. I cannot explain it. I’m still more secure in Bombay, but also more strange. It’s the same but not as I remember, seems
more crowded, chaotic, hotter, that sort of thing. Ironically, my loyalty is stronger to Bombay today than when I lived there, perhaps because I have given it up, because I wish now to feed the hand I’ve bitten (266).

Though Chicago is a very beautiful city, like a garden, his mother would not agree to call it their ‘home’. May be the things are different for Noshir and his parents. Noshir had begun his life here and has spent the days of his prime youth in this city and his parents have spent most of their lives in Bombay. Bombay still attracts Noshir but not like as it did before, exactly what Desai himself feels. (Das, 2001) Noshir’s parents are very much excited by the TV dinners and TV itself which goes on all day, and in colour and of much variety. It was a wonder during the late 70s and early 80s for the Indians. Noshir’s mother is quite impressed by the fast cooking with the help of the processed food ingredients and electronic gadgets but the Americans like Carrie are already averse of this kind of food stewed with chemicals and permeated with preservatives and additives that are harmful to the health in the long run. Noshir calls it a “different perspective” when his mother weighs the advantages more than the disadvantages. She thinks that Carrie should be grateful to be living in America. But Noshir, like Feroza, Rusi and Manek, is “grateful to be living in America and for the luxury that allowed to complain about TV dinners” (268). What attract the younger generation today to the new pastures crossing the borders of their country are the hedonistic pleasures and materialistic comforts that the life there offers with the heady feeling of freedom and individual liberty. A Parsee youth is no exception to join this journey of an immigrant. Sidhwa and Desai have very vividly delineated the mixed experiences of an immigrant with an autobiographical tinge. They, like their protagonists, have had the experience of being pulled into the vortex of the mind-blowing idea of independence the Americans have. That is the reason why the institute of marriage is difficult to be sustained there. Desai, experimenting with the innovations in his narrative technique and language, shifts the point of view from Noshir to Blythe in just one chapter to explore a different perspective as to what she thinks about Noshir and their affair. She wanted him to take the responsibility of their mutual happiness. She thinks that it was not she whom he cared about but himself. He gave her freedom, not for her but for himself, as he was afraid that she would leave him. She wanted him to exercise independence and he exercised caution. She wanted a man who took control but he let her do what she wanted. She wanted him to be jealous but he was hurt. She wanted Noshir to get angry but instead he just gave the
impression of a great good guy. She wanted him to understand but did not want to explain everything. Expressing her strange expectations from her mate she says:

I wanted him to take control but not because I told him so. My biggest fear was not that he’d leave, but that he’d never leave – and never change. I needed to push him so far he’d begin to pull me along, push him so far he’d either jump or save us both (122-23).

The Americans’ Occidental views of love, freedom and happiness are diametrically opposite to those of the Orient and at times to the extent of neurotic. Their quest for happiness and independence leads to an impasse. She guessed the reasons:

I’m sure, he’s an exile from his homeland, estranged from his family, the hole in himself bigger than Jupiter he needed to fill, but I’m an exile no less, my family more a landmine than his. He’s told you something about it, and I won’t say more except it’s no excuse, or if it’s an excuse I have more of an excuse than he does (123).

The sense of rootlessness, homelessness and non-belongingness is a very conspicuous post-modernist trait found in most of the world literature of the post cold war period. In the era of globalization, when the crossings of borders become a very common phenomenon, these issues are at the centre of the problematic constructs of the psyche of the modern global citizen. In their journey to the quest of a concrete identity, the Parsees are also part of this global predicament. Set apart the diversities and differences, they strive to etch out their uniqueness for which they have to fall back on their past and depend on their heritage and roots. It is the struggle of the whole of the mankind and each individual tries to fill the hollowness inside. Noshir provides one more reference, particularly of Lisa and it can be generalized for anybody. Everybody has that ‘hole as big as Jupiter’ which one tries to fill by various means and the quest of happiness and fulfilment continues:

How would she have been if her mother had not died? if her father had not turned to her for nurture instead of nurturing her? if she’d not had to play mommy for her daddy, her brothers, herself? if she’d had a childhood instead of the hole in herself not unlike the hole in Riff, big as Jupiter or the hole in her father, no less big, after his wife died, which he tried to fill with serial wives, cluttering the hole in Lisa with serial stepmothers, which she tried to fill herself bartering sex for affection? (229).
Everybody tries to fill the ‘hole as big as Jupiter’, with something. Noshir himself has a hole as also his girlfriends Barbara, Blythe, Lisa and lastly Sally too have this feeling of emptiness and loneliness which they try to fill by a fulfilling relationship or companionship but in vain. It is because of their strange sense of independence, nearing to selfishness and almost resulting into wantonness and frivolity. After the break-up with Lisa, Noshir gets the opportunity to make friends with Sally but he is reluctant now and does not come forward despite her positive response. She is an active girl who has done a lot and learned a lot from everything. Still she thinks she is young, just thirty-two, and plenty of time to figure out what she wants. Noshir thinks that some people like her just passes their youth aimlessly, not doing anything significant, though doing so many activities like Sally, who appeared to have cluttered her life with activity to provide the illusion of mobility, made a crutch of what she’d done to support the waste of herself, filled a hole vast as Jupiter with nothing, and missing the forest for the trees remained bewildered by the apparent meaninglessness of all (261-62).

Noshir felt that their togetherness was an “illusion: insecure people rushing into intimacy to give themselves the appearance of worldliness, kidding themselves someone cared about them” (260). This is the predicament of a modern man who is insecure in his own land, own country. This insecurity is accentuated when in a new land, as in the case of an immigrant. This kind of insecurity adds one more dimension to the insecurity already felt by this doubly diasporic Parsee community in a foreign land. Their condition is very much like the wandering Jews looking for stability and settlement and a place which they can call their home or homeland. The Parsees led a happy life in India as a diasporic community from Persia till before the Partition. Even before the British rule they were like one among the many minorities of India, i.e. the Muslims, the Jains, the Buddhists, the Sikhs and the Christians. During the British rule, the Parsees “thought they were like British only, ruling India, side by side” (Mistry, Tales, 1993: 46). In the post-independent India, however, they developed the feeling of being turned into “the second class citizens” as Gustad Noble laments in Journey about the future of the Parsee youth (55). During the process of decolonization the renaming of the streets threatens them with the effacement of their own identity. Dinshawji questions about it in the same novel (74). The banks on which they had a prominent hold were nationalized. It appeared to seal off their future
and hence they felt that they were quite relegated to the margins of the social and political life of India that they dominated once. They started to look forward to the West in search of fresh fields and new pastures and joined the voluntary immigration of the youth in the Sixties to the UK, USA and Canada. The craze for a foreign degree for already westernized Parsees was primarily responsible for looking westwards on the part of the young Parsees like Noshir; Homi, Rusi, even Adi and Soli in *Elephants* and Manek and Feroza in *Brat*. In Noshir’s case, especially, his Parsee identity comes nowhere in the picture in the hedonistic life of the ‘multicultural’ America. He himself seems to have forgotten his Parseeness of which he is reminded only when he comes to Bombay for a short span. Like Feroza or Homi, he never needs to fall back upon his Zoroastrian values and religion. In his ongoing quest for love and happiness, he never ever once requires to search for his roots and identity. Desai has portrayed a newer generation’s Parsee youth whose ‘homing desire’ is so strong that they would not prefer to look back but look ahead trying to set their roots firm in the new land. Noshir’s carefree attitude about his roots, his amnesia of his racial history and identity are worrisome posing a grave interrogation on the acculturation process in America and the conservation of the Parsees’ ethnic identity. It would indeed be a Herculean task for the latter generations of the Parsees to reconstitute their identity in their second diaspora of the western countries, with the lurking fear of losing ‘themselves’ in the melting pot of America.

*Asylum* is a realistic portrayal of the American ethos in the Sixties. Young men and women opt for the live-in arrangements overruling the institution of marriage.Flippancy in adolescence, free sex, homosexuality, nudism, and craze for licentious freedom are a way of life with the Americans. The Sixties in the American context are presented by Desai as “a difficult time” (147). What makes the matters worse is that very few of the young people would “escape from the inexorable force of time” (262). Earlier it was everyone’s business to notice whom one lived with, but now “everything was permitted” (37). People were free to enjoy everything, responsible only to themselves (46). “They’ll try anything” (267) and “were comfortable enough with … (their) bodies and bodily functions” (107). It was their life and the young would not stand any interference; and rather would go by trials and errors. Noshir, on behalf of the novelist, tells us, “Some learned a hundred lessons from one mistake, others nothing from a hundred, still others made the same mistake a hundred times”
Towards the end of the novel, the realization dawns upon the protagonist that “a lover’s rise is shorter than his fall” (221). The novelist holds the sociological climate devoid of commitment and traditional values as responsible for this state of affairs. Commitment and traditional values, Desai feels, may provide a panacea for the ills because “the values remain constant” and “are at their most valuable when at their least fashionable”. He adds, nevertheless, that even traditional families fall apart for “a lack of love” (115). It is shown that the values are replaced by betrayal, duplicity, jealousy, pretension and hypocrisy, although what is needed most is responsibility, understanding and genuine concern.

And that is the topic of the conversation that takes place at the end of the novel between Noshir and Barbara. They meet, just as friends, many years after they were divorced from the contract marriage. Barbara reveals what she thinks of Noshir who is shocked to know it. She thinks that Noshir only pretends to be good and sensitive and it is only the way for him to behave and not the real him. Deep down, he is just like the rest pretending to care (271-72). It struck Noshir for the first time why she thought so:

She didn’t want anyone to care for her; she would have to care for them back and she didn’t think she could do it; she had little respect for herself to expect it from anyone else, to respect anyone who showed her more respect than she thought she deserved. She was, like so many, filling a hole big as Jupiter, her mother dead when she was young, her wife-beating father whom she blamed for her mother’s death, her lover doing a bunk for whom she’d aborted the thickening in her belly, she was filling her hole big as Jupiter with me and whatever else as I was filling mine with her and etcetera, both of us misguided because neither had what it took to fill the other, and neither should have expected such a fill from anyone but him&herself. The question was when we would find the strength to stop (273-74).

What Desai means to say that the values of care, concern, commitment, understanding, loyalty and trust are missing in one’s own self. To expect any of such things from others, one has to have that first in one’s own self. The lack of such values results in lack of love which everybody looks for in others. And without love and care, there is no fulfilment. And that is why the inner hole, which stands for emptiness and craving for love, becomes bigger and bigger like Jupiter. Desai has repeatedly employed this image of hole throughout the novel very effectively. This hole is nothing but the valuelessness in a person that results in the feeling of
worthlessness. Desai, through his mouthpiece Noshir, observes that none is without such hole in America. After realising this bitter truth about each other Noshir and Barbara leave the bar in silence and depart without saying goodbye. They never saw each other again. Noshir was not angry on Barbara’s accusation on him but was sad recognizing that my love for her, my love for her or even my “love” for her, or even my """""""love"""" had always been subterranean, always in the shadow of the bond between us, of her bond with Carmie, of mine with Blythe – always a symptom of sickness (274).

The healthiness in the relationships narrated in the novel is missing. Desai ruminates at many points on the issues like love, truth, faith, happiness, freedom, racism etc. There are many such flashes of philosophy on life in the novel though Desai does not seem to have any pretentions of being an intellectual or a philosopher. The frivolous character of the novel gets its depth by Desai’s sharp and vivid philosophical observations and reflections. Despite the differences between the East and West in values, cultures, faiths and many more, Noshir, after experiencing angst in the post-hippie America, is ready to settle down in America. He has filed his papers for his citizenship and succeeds in getting it at the end. Has his search for ‘home’ and ‘identity’ completed? Has also his hunt for love and happiness come to an end? The answers are yet to be found out. The novelist interrogates and poses these questions before us. The answers depend on the individuals. The Parsee diasporic writers of Indian origin under study, Mistry, Sidhwa and Desai, themselves have had the first-hand experiences of the hybridized and hyphenated existence and its complexities. In an interview, Desai speaks to Vineetha Mokkil about the ‘homelessness’ that inspires him to write. Asked as to how strongly the consciousness of being born into the Indian Parsee community has influenced his writing, he answered:

When I lived in Mumbai, I took my Parsi identity for granted. But oddly enough, when I moved to the United States, I became acutely conscious of it. People there always asked me why I didn’t look ‘Indian’! Then I would explain that I am a Parsi, born in India (Mokkil: 2009).

Desai visits his family in Mumbai once a year. He observes, “I like Mumbai for its energy and its warmth. India is changing, each time I come here I realise how quickly
things are moving ahead” (Mokkil: 2009). Replying to the query if he felt at home in Mumbai even after the 30 odd years of separation he confesses sheepishly:

No, I do feel a bit out of place. My Hindi is rusty, I can’t stand the heat. So I try and schedule my visit when it’s not too hot. But I don’t feel completely at home in the United States either, being an Indian in America sets you apart, even after many years (Mokkil: 2009).

Desai, like his characters, seems to belong to different worlds, and is not at home in any. This ‘homelessness’ inspires him to continue his journey as a writer. The distance helps in getting a dual perspective. He is most comfortable writing about these two cities, Bombay and Chicago where he has spent most of his life. Talking to Anupreeta Das he says:

Had I not written about Bombay and Chicago first, I wouldn’t have had the confidence to tackle other places. I know now that it’s just a question of bringing your emotion, your intelligence and research to bear in a book. What makes characters alive is what we have in common with them, not what is different. The history and geography of the book’s location matter less than my understanding of the characters (Das: 2001).

Elephants is more focused on Parsee identity than Asylum as Noshir never becomes conscious of his Parseeness or his religious identity as a Zoroastrian. Maybe Desai has explored another possibility that the Parsee youth may take a turn towards hedonism sans religion. Still, the conflict of the cultures is evident in Noshir’s philosophical musings and ponderings. Acknowledging as a part of the brigade of the Indo-Anglican writers and that too, getting narrower, a Parsee expatriate writer, Desai explains: “I am a Parsee, therefore I write about Parsees, but I use my Parsee-ism, if you wish, as a springboard into other cultures” (Das: 2001). There are several similarities between the two protagonists of Elephants and Asylum, Homi and Noshir respectively -- both young Parsee men go to the US in pursuit of higher education, both falling hopelessly in love with the American women and hence both the books can be described as journey to self-knowledge. Desai admits that there is an autobiographical self but he does not want to be self-indulgent and wants to focus more on his characters. He uses a lot of narrative devices to distract the readers from such autobiographical traits; like the metaphor of the car in Asylum though overdone at times, and that of the memoscan in Elephants or the narrator within narrator or the
shifting points of views or running words into each other without space or stories within a story or alliteration or word-play or the title-less chapter just indicated by quote-marks and the chapter ending just with the quote-marks running to one and a half pages. And of course the use of irony and humour with dry wit adds to the unique flavour of his language.

Asylum is the story of the urban Indian’s American dream of going to the US, studying there, marrying an “American” and of ultimately becoming an “American”, or to be specific, a middle-class American. Urmi Goswami urges not to misinterpret the book as just dealing with the promiscuous American society but also heed upon the gravity of some deeper speculations. She says:

Boman Desai appeals to a certain idea of America that many Indians hold dear, that America is a land of plenty, plenty of women, that is. All available for the asking and yet to classify this book as a sexual romp would be a great injustice. Its biggest problem is that it tries to be deep. One could say that it tries too hard (Goswami, 2001: 23).

Desai frequently interrupts his ‘immigration’ story for lengthy dwellings upon love, liberty, truth, white-black dynamics/racism, man-woman relationship and gender-discrimination, Bombay and the problems of writing. He cuts himself short each time saying, “There is a book there, but again this isn’t it” (167,173,258). A whole book can be written on each of these topics but that is not his purpose here. He tries to keep his Volkswagen on the highway of the main theme, i.e. the “Disneyland syndrome” (17,114,185). His authorial asides are the saving graces; otherwise the novel would have slipped into commonalty. To use his own words, “Understanding is a step but knowing when to stop is two steps”. The central message lies in this silly sounding line, “No full stops in Never-Never Land.”

The liberated attitude of the women and to the women give the impression that the women in the most advanced country in the world enjoy the absolute independence, individually as well as socially. But it is not so. Their condition is still dismal due to the discrimination perpetuated against them in the society. Owing to the male chauvinism, the women are given less than what they deserve. We are told:
You wouldn’t believe the incompetence of some of the men working there, but
you won’t give any of the top jobs to women no matter how competent they
are (108).

The rules are constantly bent to harm women’s interests. “The battle of the sexes”,
comments the protagonist “is a gruelling, bruising, unfair game, the rules of which
you learn so you can break them to your advantage” (260). In this battle, the women
emerge worse off. The novelist presents his women characters as victims of their
circumstances and that shows the plight of women in this ‘progressive’ country, no
better than any other. Barbara’s problems started with her mother’s premature death
for which she held her “wife-beating” father responsible (273-74). She had to undergo
an abortion due to her lover’s infidelity. Her lesbian partner Carmie, just an
“expedience” and not her “soul-mate”, (80) had been raped at the age of fifteen and
had a child who lived with her mother. Carmie’s love for Barbara was more tender
than sexual for “they both needed tenderness more than sex” (49). Both the women
were maltreated by the males in their lives and had a grim past which has made them
to hate men and go for a live-in lesbian relationship. The women seek their identity in
their sameness when they are drawn to lesbianism. Then we have Blythe who lost her
father when she was still a child and was subjected to regular beatings, like her
mother by her stepfather. Sheila Waggoner married her high school science teacher,
thirty years older than her, who fathered three children, but after that “he’d despaired
that he was too old to satisfy her and lined up his friends to sleep with her on
weekends” (137). She ran away but went back to him for the sake of her beautiful
kids. Finally, Lisa whose mother dies when she was just nine is doomed to tolerate
her “racy” third stepmother. Her father’s “serial wives” disappeared on him one by
one and Lisa had to nurture him and her brothers, “play mommy” for them instead of
being herself nurtured. Placed in more favourable circumstances, these women would
have probably behaved in a different way. The unjust circumstances created a void – a
hole as big as Jupiter -- in these characters including Noshir who too was serially
dumped by his lovers. He realised that it was a never-ending Disneyland and it goes
on and on to their next generations and so on. There is no stopping of it as the parents
thrust their ambitions and frustrations on their children who turn out to be vulnerable
and not strong enough to cope with life. Noshir advises Lisa to finish her education,
and he too, takes up his studies for getting a doctorate in Electrical Engineering, once
he recovers from the break-up of his tempestuous affair with Lisa. Noshir’s appetite
for passion is killed and he is no more interested in any girl now, not even Sally, as his emotions are already consummated. After a few years when he once met Lisa, not married to Jim for whom she had left Noshir, but a rich engineer and had finished her MBA, now a housewife with kids whom she loved, but did not want to make them her reason for existence. Neither did she want to do the good job of a manager she was getting. She thought her husband earned enough and besides she “maintained her independence keeping her maiden name, her circle of friends” (256). Noshir ponders:

I understood something she seemed already to have understood, but I said nothing. There are always children to rectify the defects of our lives, but children are given us in trust, not to keep and to expect them to mend the breach between our accomplishments and our ambitions, even to mend the breach between our ambitions for them and their own ambitions, is to betray the trust, to throw the children into the breach, into the hole as big as Jupiter, to make no more of them than animals marking territory (257).

Desai has a point of contention against the generalization that some men make about women that a woman needs to be handled rather than understood but with love. The writer thinks this is pernicious and it remains a point to ponder. Women too might argue that men are hardly less easy to understand and Desai, through Noshir, argues that – “there is no essential difference. Men loving men have problems as do men loving women or women loving men or women loving women. The mystery is not whom we love but love itself” (172). And then there are his ruminations on love. Desai brings to light the problem rarely addressed in his typically witty style:

Women married to wife-beaters are sympathetic; men married to husband-beaters are simply pathetic. Career women are respected, house husbands ridiculed. Bread winning women kid about needing wives, but men with breadwinning wives are kidded themselves, not heeded seriously. A woman who quits work to mind her babies is fulfilling her responsibility; a man who quits is shirking his. Women have choices between career, family, a combination of the two; men have choices between career, career and career, and if they don’t make the choice they become less than men. These are not men problems or women problems but human problems. Liberated humans first, men and women second….. but here is yet another book to be written and again this is not it. Let me emphasize only that I am not making arguments for either side and that neither side will be liberated until they recognize that they are both on the same side, that the schism is between the liberated and the unliberated rather than between men and women (173).
Desai alias Noshir is very clear about the social constructs created for gender difference. The differences melt when both the sides consider each other as humans and genders later. The same consideration on humanitarian ground should work for any kind of difference, not only gender; it may be religion, class, creed or any other. Liberty, equality and fraternity are three rudiments of democracy on which the concept of multiculturalism is based. To consider the ‘other’ as equal and important as the “self” would rule out all differences. The sublime principle of love for all would make one think of the rights of others and transcend all barriers of differences which are nothing but the conditioning of the mind that needs to be de-conditioned. Desai very aptly puts forth his speculations on the right kind of attitude which is to be developed in the multicultural societies. Citing Buckminster Fuller he says that mind is conceivably the essential anti-entropic function for eternally conserving the universe. He means that everybody’s mind, collectively and individually, have syntropic powers. “If we are to avail in the end we must use mind to wrest meaning from experience. If we are to make sense of major horrors, of the large conflicts in the world at large, we must first make sense of our minor mishaps, of our own small subjective conflicts, we have to think, we have to understand, we have to understand that understanding is limited. We have to accept on faith that which we cannot understand, because without faith there is nothing” (264). This is nothing new. Fuller’s rationale has been pre-echoed in many faiths, in the karmic principle of Hinduism, the dualism of Zoroastrianism, the sowing and reaping of Christianity, the secular belief that what goes around comes around, not to mention Einstein’s dictum: “God does not play with dice. Matter, energy karma, none can be created, none destroyed; only changed” (264).

In this context, a very small incident that takes place in the beginning of the novel proves significant. It was the time when Noshir had just arrived in America and was settling down with his student fraternity and the American surroundings. He used to play piano and had all kinds of mixed American audience. He was interested to become a Bohemian. At that time he used to wear hats and his favourite one was made of lamb’s wool, a Muslim prayer hat belonging to Ejaz Ahmed, a Pakistani from Karachi with whom he shared a room in one of the campus fraternities during the summer. Noshir asked for his prayer hat to wear it sometime. His friend was reluctant initially as it was not a toy or a fashion statement. But then Noshir promised that he
would look after it as it were a work of art. Ezaj was a good-hearted fellow. He considered it and lent it on the condition that it should not get dirty or there would be a Hell to pay. It was a measure of his trust that he let Noshir wear his hat. Noshir was more than flattered and very much touched. He had committed in the heart of his hearts to guard his hat with all his life to repay his trust. Trust begets trust and the differences do not matter. It is the fellow feeling, goodness and faith that matter. Ezaj was a pious Muslim and used to genuflect on a mat to say his prayers five times a day facing Mecca. One day he came running to Noshir, terrified that he had committed a grave mistake. He had been facing California all this time instead of Mecca. In Karachi, the setting sun directed him toward Mecca. In Chicago the setting sun directed him toward California. He asked Noshir what to do. Noshir was flipped and glibly retorted that California was his new Mecca. Apart from the humour in it there is a serious message that it is the faith that matters. It happened once that Noshir was involved in a brawl with some naughty boys called ‘Just Kids’ in the campus and he was injured. The food he was carrying dropped on the ground and Ezaj’s prayer hat had also fallen on the ground messed up with chocolate and blood. Noshir escaped the Just Kids but he still had the Hell to pay. He regretted a lot for what had happened and heartily apologized. Ezaj was just agape for a moment but when he noticed Noshir’s injury and the blood on his face he was solicitous and forgave him as Noshir explained what had happened. Noshir was ready to pay for his hat but Ezaj denied. He had not minded the mess despite his firm belief in his religious fundamentals. He exercised a great virtue of forgiveness on the humanitarian ground understanding that it was not Noshir’s fault. He could have become angry and violent, had he not understood the situation. It could have been converted into a big fight, had he wished. Terrible conflicts and riots just need such flimsy spark. It does not matter whether they are among the majority or minority in their own countries, i.e. a Muslim from Pakistan and a Parsee from India, but they are considered as the South Asians in the American multicultural milieu and they cannot afford to surface their differences in an alien foreign land. Even otherwise, Ezaj proved to be a good human being. Noshir performs a symbolic act the next morning suggesting a great message. He went back to the spot; brought back the rock with dark patches of dried blood and buried it outside the fraternity, even provided a gravestone for that stone. This symbolic act suggests burying the violence within and acting with understanding, tolerance, trust and love. Desai talks about these sublime virtues that are capable of transcending all
differences, i.e. race, religion, nationality, culture, gender and so on. The liberal attitude based on humanity, equality and fraternity would make the world worth-living and an egalitarian one in the true sense, no matter how multicultural it is at any corner of it.
A WOMAN MADLY IN LOVE

The Parsee voice has always carried a distinctive timbre in the subcontinental and diasporic writing. Whether it is Sidhwa in Lahore and USA or Mistry in Bombay and Canada or Desai in Bombay and USA or Dhondy in Pune, Bombay and UK, their narrative style is marked by fluidity and clarity. Unlike the works of the other Parsee expatriate writers, Chicago-based Boman Desai’s novels focus more on the experience of the immigrant protagonists and hence less on the mores and ethnicity of this fast depleting miniscule Parsee minority community. All the protagonists of Desai -- Homi and Rusi in Elephants, Noshir in Asylum and Farida in Woman -- shuttle between Bombay and Chicago like Desai himself.

The woman madly in love is Farida Cooper, a rich, spoilt, beautiful, intelligent and talented, assertive and outspoken Parsee heiress of an elite and privileged Bombay family, the Coopers. At 22, she falls in love and marries her professor in English, Horace Finksch, twice her age and a divorcee. The marriage ends disastrously when she is 35 and is expectant again after a series of miscarriages. She is heart-broken when Horace cheats on her by keeping clandestine relations with his first wife who had deserted him for somebody and has a girl by him. Farida returns ‘home’, Bombay where she and Horace had come for their Honeymoon. Her Father who was happy with her marriage to an American is no more. The Parsees’ fascination for the West is no secret. Farida’s parents were estranged though living together and did not care much for Farida as Nariman Cooper wanted a male heir which Persis, her mother, could not provide after a number of miscarriages. Her wealthy father had the habit of chasing women and her mother grows rigid and unloving in consequence. Farida’s saving grace is her Kaki with whom she lives after her sixth birthday, but this also heightens the sense of her parents’ indifference.

Farida is too shocked by her husband’s treachery even to talk about it to her family and friends in Bombay. In hiding her shame she succeeds only in denying the damage to herself and making casualties of others, among them an infatuated 17 year old boy, Darius Katrak with whom she has an almost immediate affair. The teenager is awed,
flattered and finally seduced by Farida in a wild romance. The affair was difficult to survive due to social pressures. Only suddenly by the accidental death of the boy’s twin sister Yasmeen in a car-crash for which Farida blames herself, she breaks up from Darius. Aghast by the behaviour of the Katraks, she decides to leave for Chicago; of course, a painful decision. Fifteen years later at the age of 50, while living in a small cell called the artist’s studio, she meets Percy Faber, head of a tele-survey company, when she is interviewed by him for a job. At the end of the novel, after a few in-between anonymous affairs frequently falling in and out of love, Farida finally finds happiness with someone of a “fuller maturity”, a sixty plus man, Percy Faber.

From a buoyant, vivacious and a voluptuous young woman she grows into a selfish and dangerously courageous middle-aged one who at times loses control. Very often, she hardly knows what she wants. She is not able to figure out her priorities for quite some time after the divorce. She is a woman confused by her circumstances. Though very self-analytical, clear-headed and having a mind of her own, she is the victim of her fate right from her childhood due to the maladjustment of her parents. The only motherly care and support she gets, is from her Kaki who understands Farida and with whom Farida shares most of her personal secrets. They talk a lot about the issues of love and marriage when Farida tells her about her affair with Darius. Also there is a lot of space occupied by art and academia. Because Farida and Horace both belong to the department of English, they are comfortable quoting the literary geniuses and discuss literary theories. But at times, it sounds heavy-headed and tedious. It is also a difficult task to see the world through the eyes of a female protagonist as Desai himself admits in an interview in *The Hindu*, but he has managed admirably, throwing light on the gender discrimination even in the so-called liberal American society (Salam: 2004). Earlier, though in *Asylum* and *Elephants* there are male protagonists, Desai does bring in the issue of human rights and gender bias. For Farida, the issue of the crisis of her identity as a Parsee Indian becomes much more complicated by being a woman herself. In Sidhwa’s case, the author’s identification with the narrator Lenny and the protagonist Feroza is easier compared to Desai’s with Farida. Mistry’s female characters hardly have any depth except Dina.

Another noteworthy difference is that Sidhwa has taken up the issue of the inter-faith marriage, especially of a Parsee girl to a non-Parsee boy, i.e. Feroza with David, and
the threatened ostracism of a girl from the Parsee fold leading to the break-up of the affair. Desai, here, portrays Farida as groomed in the more urbanized and cosmopolitan Bombay of the 80s; quite in contrast to the conservative Islamic social milieu of Lahore in case of Feroza. Though the elite Parsee group of Bombay is the most westernized lot, Desai does bring in the issue of sending a girl abroad for further studies. The society was not that advanced and progressive even in the 80s, as Farida’s desire to go to the USA for her education is very much resisted by her mother Persis herself just as Feroza’s prospects were discussed with objection by her beloved grandmother Khutlibai. Just as Feroza is supported by her mother Zarin, Farida is supported by her Kaki, who is as good as her mother. Some excerpts from their conversation would make the social viewpoint of the time more clear. Farida’s mother, who herself has not been to college and got married in her later teens is quite boastful of her beauty that got her married to a Cooper and she did not require to go abroad or get any higher education for that. When Farida lists the names of a lot of her classmates going abroad, Persis draws her attention to the fact that majority of them are the boys and the girls are very few; either going with the family or they are Anglo-Indians. Most of the girls in Bombay go to college in Bombay itself, mostly Sophia College. She believes that a girl needs good education, but not too much. Otherwise, no one will want her. As such, it will be difficult enough to find a good boy for a Cooper and it is bad enough that Farida appears for the HSC. She would be completely out of reach with a foreign education. No boy will be good enough for her (290-91). Farida’s Kaki supports her saying that the higher education abroad would broaden her horizons and increase her options. Vehemently denying, Persis pursues her debate: “She doesn’t need to increase her options. She has too many options as it is. If she gets too many more she will only be confused” (292). Still, Kaki insists that they should give her the best opportunity and this is the age for her education which will never come back. Persis fears: “If heaven forbid, she marries an American, God only knows what will happen. It would be a complete fiasco” (292). Kaki does not agree and gives some examples of such marriages. She persists with her argument and Persis has to give in and “swallow the bitter pill”. It is a pity that the minds of women like Persis are conditioned by the patriarchal system of society.

Even the more liberal societies of America, more modern and open in their outlook compared to that of the Indian metro like Bombay are not free from such gender bias,
not only in education but in the professional job-market too. Farida is too frustrated to face such gender discrimination at her workplace. Once she opens up her heart to her close friend Rohini:

A man had to support a family, a woman got married, or had babies and quit. Yes, but still they would do a better job. I would do a better job, they know I would do a better job but I’m still the Research Assistant because, of course, I’ve had two miscarriages, and I’m pregnant again. Sooner or later, they assume I’ll be leaving – but supposing I wanted to stay, supposing I wanted a career with the company, supposing I wanted to come back after the baby? Then what? (249).

Farida complains that the less eligible and less competent males are promoted and given better chances just on such assumptions. Rohini too sighs, “It’s a man’s world, Farida – just think how it is in India. At least, here, in Chicago you have been able to make some contribution, however small” (250). The problem is not simply one of distributing rights and resources to groups, cultures or here in this case, genders on equal footing; but the problem is with the underlying social norms that constitute opportunities in the first place. Not all multiculturalist theorists are satisfied with the liberal egalitarian reliance on equality of opportunity. For radical multiculturalists like Iris Marion Young and Nancy Fraser, the turn towards group or cultural recognition follows from the false neutrality of liberal distributive norms. Young’s egalitarian argument is the direct critique of the liberal egalitarianism. It concerns with the norms that structure the opportunities in the first place. Not all the relevant denials of equal recognition take the form of overt discrimination. In the case of Farida, not being promoted in lieu of her male American colleague is the instance of covert discrimination. Hers is an example of discrimination against women at the workplace by not opening up job opportunities to them and by informally reserving all the senior management positions for men. Such latent gender preferences used to prevail even in the so-called liberal American work-culture and mar its healthiness. Though equal protection has been offered now, these changes have not necessarily been accompanied by greater access to women at such positions in business and government. The reason for this is that the opportunities themselves, open to all talents, nevertheless reflect wider patterns of social and gender expectations. Women are still expected to be seen in the roles of the primary care-takers of their pre-school children and therefore less committed to careers, whatever choices the individual
women might have taken about their lives and careers. The onus of the stress begotten due to the attempt to balance the two, effecting the adjustments or maladjustments, is still on women and this often adds to the stressful burden they carry.

The American women, most of them, are quite content with the patriarchal system. Ginger, Horace’s first wife, is happy to hear Farida quitting her job due to her third pregnancy. But Farida is not comfortable with the way Ginger thinks, quite conventional. She is not happy with the times and complains ruefully:

We seem to be moving backward, but what interested me more than anything else was what Friedan said about the stories in the women’s magazines. She …. found that during the Thirties and Forties the stories were routinely about career women, about women who gave up men for their careers only to find men who respected them for their careers – but the stories of the Fifties went the other way women giving up careers for men (260).

Ginger sees nothing wrong in that and Farida cannot digest the fact that a woman diminishes herself to get what she wants. She does not understand the reason. Ginger thinks that there is no reason but that the formula works and that is how the things are supposed to be -- “Women get what they want by letting men think they’re the boss. We cook and clean and give them babies and they buy us clothes and jewellery and take us to Bahamas. What could be fairer? It’s foolproof” (261).

But it is not acceptable to Farida. The discomfort she feels is felt by many women –

The stories of the Thirties and Forties were written by women, but after the war, when men controlled the purse strings again, they changed the mould to suit themselves. Not only did the stories become about women catering to men, but women fulfilled by catering to men. It was supposed to be their sole reason for existence, but it left many of them unfulfilled -- and apologetic for being just housewives. The stories idealized the male fantasy, not the female, because the formula was written by men – but they were passed off as women’s fantasies (261).

Ginger believes that it is a matter of perspective and Farida thinks that it is precisely the man’s argument. Even Horace insists Farida to change her perspective and look from a different angle, of course, he means from the male’s. He says, “…and then you will wonder why you ever resisted. It is resistance that is your problem, not your intellect. If you stop resisting, you will understand. All you have to do is come to the
other side and you will see for yourself. Everything will be clear, all your doubts gone -- obliterated” (320).

He expects Farida to pamper and inflate his male ego and thereby strengthen the male hegemony. It is possible only if she drops resistance which is not in Farida’s temperament. She wonders if women need such arguments to remind themselves of their worth; that’s a problem in itself. If they have to be told how to feel then how can they trust their feelings? Farida herself does not know the solution but she only knows that she wants to do things differently (261-62).

Bucky, Farida’s school-mate, is a step further from Ginger. She knows that the women looking for their individuality are also exploited by men who want to enjoy the women’s financial independence at their cost only. In such case, the women like Bucky exploit the social conditions to their advantage. Bucky had quit her job with Telco to the consternation of all her friends, most of all her husband. She says:

I only got the degree to get married. Otherwise, he would not have married me. Said from the start he wanted a double income – but too late now. What is he going to do? Divorce me? He has to take care of me. I wouldn’t have quit if we needed money – but he makes enough (188).

At that time it had seemed so many things simultaneously -- a victory; even funny; Jhangu, her husband, the butt of joke; the trick for women not only to get married but to get their way in everything; deception merely the handicap they were allowed against the economic power of men; ‘a sop to the weaker sex’ which she had played to the hilt. The minds of the most of the womenfolk are conditioned like Ginger and Bucky and they feel the fulfilment in just being dependent on their counterparts though they are capable enough to be independent. Most of the women are not ready or physically not capable to work hard and take the stress of the dual duties of family and work. May be Farida does not have the first-hand experience of rearing the children and can be short of understanding the troubles undergone. In Asylum too, Desai touches this issue of gender bias in man-woman relationship and puts forth the seed for a thought. Women’s liberation is giving everyone a different perspective but Desai tries to look at it from different angles too for objective analysis. Jhangu’s
‘angst’ of being tricked and fixed in a certain situation because of Bucky’s hasty decision is expressed herein:

Arre, Farida, I am telling you, I swallowed the bait. We could have done better on a double income – but the moment we came back from our honeymoon almost the same day, she quit, just like that. Good job she had at Telco, might have become a manager, may be a vice president, may be something more – but, instead, what? Gave it up. Supposing I just gave up my job, then what? But she is the wife; she can do what she wants. Tricked, kicked and licked – that was how I felt I can tell you. Tricked, kicked and licked (200-01).

Jhangu’s self-defence is ironic. Women’s choices are envied by men but in either situation, that of a housemaker or a working woman, the women’s condition is empathized or is it so that Desai tries to make us look at the entire issue from a different perspective? Happiness and satisfaction are evasive in any case if the choice of either partner is not respected and it is the case in most of the situations.

Even as a working woman, Farida has experienced the pressure of domination from her higher authorities, most often males. She has been resisting and struggling to carve out her own identity but has been constantly passing through critical phases brought about by the discrimination and injustice done to her. When she faces her new immediate head, one of her less eligible male colleague just recently promoted by-passing her and the other female colleagues, her irate demeanour and manners of speech baffle him. He found her presumptuous as a woman and a foreigner who should have been grateful for any job, certainly one as professional as Research Assistant for market analysis, presumptuous also for wearing saris to work. Glad to have piqued her new manager Farida is reminded of a question by Rohini: “Would she have been content exchanging places with Horace, she the Joycean, he the graduate student in English working as a Research Assistant? Would Horace then have seemed no more than a bum? If so, what did that say about herself? But as a woman her options were limited: either she availed herself of the bounty of a man or surrendered herself to a lifetime of gender discrimination, one path smacked of prostitution, the other of martyrdom” (253). On and off the job, Farida is discontent and uncomfortable in either position. After quitting the job and taking up various activities of her liking to keep herself engaged during her pregnancy, Farida is still not
happy and satisfied. She opens up before her bosom friend Rohini once again expressing her discomfort:

Do you know, I think I would actually like to have a regular job again. I hate being just Mrs. Horace Finksch – no, don’t argue! That’s what I have become. Aside from him I have no identity. There is no Farida Cooper any more. I may not have taken his name, but we are what we do, and I do nothing, which leaves with what I am: Mrs. Horace Finksch - and I hate it. Sometimes I think even he hates it – and who can blame him? I am like a vampire sucking his identity (304).

Farida feels she has lost her identity in just being the wife of Horace. She feels she does not do anything worthwhile anymore, does nothing that matters; just floats along on ennui. She is also not satisfied by the voluntary services she provides at a Children’s Hospital. She feels she should be doing much more and not waste her potential. She wants to study further but she is not sure of what exactly she wants to do. Rohini comforts her by telling that the prospective baby would engage her beautifully. But Farida feels miserably incomplete. Her struggle and quest for identity continues throughout. She wants to carve out her own niche. She is never comfortable under the shadow of any established identity or does not want to be the part of any set identity. Even her awe-inspiring elite surname ‘Cooper’ she would never like to use to her advantage, at least never in America, though she cannot help it in Bombay. Farida, unlike her mother who had not divorced Nariman just for the Cooper tag, resents the extra attention and importance she receives as a Cooper. After breaking away from Darius, she thinks that the next option in her life “would be more easily found. She continually realized in the anonymity of Chicago where she was just Farida, if anything handicapped by solitude, her colour and lack of antecedents, than in Bombay where she would always be first a Cooper” (405).

Aghast by the conventional response of Darius that she is a woman and she does need to be taken care of, she attributes such response to Darius’ inexperience of the world but she herself no longer wants the conventional ways of the world. She would have to find her own way. She drops the plan of making an art gallery on a Cooper asset because she decides to renounce the strong-armed generosity of her widowed mother. She understands her mistake and realizes:
It’s not my gallery. It’s the Cooper gallery. My mother only proved what I should have known all along. Sea View is a Cooper building, it is not my building, I did nothing to earn it. I want to do something finally that I can call my own. I wish I knew just what it might be -- but whatever it is I want to do it on my own, and it will be easier to do it on my own in Chicago (406).

She runs away from her Cooper identity in Bombay. It would never let her individuality bloom. On the other hand, Farida’s mother’s capitalist ideology has made her into such a snob that she thinks that the Coopers never work; they get the work done from others instead. Farida is pained to see what her mother has become. In contrast, Farida’s self-esteem is hurt when she comes to know about the Parsee link between Percy Faber and herself and that it is the Parsee card that has got her the job. She wants to stand on her own as an individual and wants to be respected as a human being irrespective of her gender, race and social class. She only knows that she is in search of this ideal state of justice sought in her own identity in the society but she is perplexed as to how to achieve it. As a young-in-twenties foreigner in America she becomes more conscious of her roots as an Indian Parsee. Though in Chicago she prefers to wear sari which is a Gujarati costume adopted by the Parsee women and an identity mark of an Indian. She had rarely worn saris in Bombay. First, she had been too young, and during her teens had preferred the western dress favoured by family and friends, symbols of modernity and free thinking in newly independent India, particularly among the Parsee peerage form whom she drew her identity – but in Chicago some imagined she might be coloured for the colour of her skin, though not for her features, and decidedly not for her accent. She disliked the confusion because it undermined her sense of herself: a proud member of her own diaspora she had no wish to be lost in anyone else’s (93). Farida’s choice of costume, western in India and Indian abroad, reflect the paradoxical attitude of the Parsees; though in both the cases they tend to assert their alterity/difference.

The Parsees have never been comfortable and proud being recognized as Indians. They would rather like to mingle easily with the whites with their genetic fairness of the skin and inclination to everything that is western and be recognized as Parsees only. Farida’s choice of dress and her light brown tan create the ‘confusion’ in her identity. The West attracts the Parsee the most and they immigrate for various reasons and to avoid diverse unfavourable situations. Gustad in Journey wants his son Sohrab
to move to the West to avoid the insecurity the Parsee feel due to the separatist forces in India and also to elevate from their middle-class status; Feroza chooses to stay in the USA to be away from the suffocating conservatism of the ‘home’ country Pakistan and Farida is fed up of being a Cooper. She does not want to bask in the past glory of her family and race in India and shuns her elite status. Crossing the borders she wants to prove her worth.

Though in America, Farida wants to be independent from her Cooper identity, she very much exploits it when in Bombay in India. During her honeymoon with Horace at Bombay she informs him:

“Well, the marriage pool is small enough for Parsis in India, not to mention in the world, and smaller yet for Coopers – for whom, of course, no one is good enough –
‘Except a Finksch!’
‘Rich Americans are always an exception.’
‘They have to be rich?’ (139).

This conversation tells us why this marriage of Farida has not met with any resistance from his family, especially her father who is a proud Cooper. Otherwise the interfaith marriage of a Parsee girl is a major issue in the community leading to the ostracization of the girl. Maybe Desai wants to focus on their admiration for the ‘White’ overweighing and overbearing the norms of the community. Even Farida is flattered by this family pride when she is with her father “dilating continually on himself as if no one else mattered. It seemed they all lived in a gilded cage, too blinded by their own glitter to see the cage, to see even themselves as people first instead of Coopers but in this they were no different from the public who also saw them as Coopers first (142). The irony is quite evident here and also is the Parsees’ fascination for the West. The vast gulf it creates in their identity in becoming “rich in the poor country and poor in the rich country” as Desai says in his Asylum is not easy to tackle. Farida, the heiress of a wealthy family in Bombay becomes an ordinary South Asian or Indian immigrant striving to prove herself and leading a frugal life when she has to start afresh after her tempestuous affair with Darius. Once Farida talks to Ratan, her friend and her aspiring suitor in Bombay, about her desire to be self-made like her ancestors, the Coopers whose hard work and industry had earned
them the name and fame she still enjoyed. She does not like to feed upon their glory like a parasite. She does a comparative analysis for Ratan:

“I mean, we might be Coopers and we might act like big shots, but we are still big fish in a small pond.”
“Bombay is a small pond?”
“On the stage of the world, it is - what I mean is that by international standards, it is. It’s not New York or London or Paris or Rome. It’s not even Chicago – and in any case, if we weren’t Coopers we would amount to very little even in Bombay.”
“But why think of it like that? We are Coopers, after all.”
“Yes, but there are Coopers and there are Coopers. There are the Coopers who made us Coopers, and there are the Coopers who were merely born Coopers. The former were entrepreneurs, the latter merely care-takers. We are among the latter, and very fortunate, but we mustn’t let it go to our heads.”
“I’m afraid I don’t see that it matters – I mean, what does it matter as long as we are Coopers?”
“Well, I suppose what I mean to say is that if we hadn’t been born Coopers we might have had more incentive to become like the people who made us Coopers” (184).

Farida implies that she would never enjoy the status of the ‘born Coopers’ resulting in the vanity and snobbishness. And that is why she prefers the anonymity of Chicago, where she can start from the scratch and prove her worth by her talents and diligence. In the prime of her youth as an immigrant she enjoyed the attention she and her friend Rohini received, walking together high-spirited, barebellied in saris, brown skinned, Farida butterscotch, Rohini chocolate, both exotic on 57th street in what passed for the commonest garb on Bombay Warden Road. They found easier to indulge with the other than with anyone else, in no small part because both were strangers in a strange world, Indians in Wonderland, accountable for the first time in their lives to no one but themselves (93). Farida’s preference to wear sari in America is because of her wish to highlight her difference. Her carefree walk with her friend, both in saris, can induce either the wonder for the exotic or the racial hostility among the locals. Wearing it at a workplace might invite the queer glances. Mahajan has mentioned that the western liberal democracies have been more receptive to claims for exemptions that have come from minorities in the recent times. However, the relative success in this field has not come about without a struggle. Exemptions have been granted to specific minorities so that their religious and cultural norms related to worship, initiation ceremonies, dress codes, food habits etc. can be accommodated in the public
For example, special provisions have been made to allow Sikhs to wear turbans, Muslim girls to wear a ‘chador’ to school and Asian women to wear their traditional dress to their workplace (Mahajan, 2002: 96-97).

Back to Bombay, Farida meets the same question from almost everybody if she found Bombay changed. And Farida answers with practised ease that Bombay is not much changed but that she has changed herself living in Chicago. It was the same feeling that Noshir had when he first came to Bombay from Chicago and maybe it was of Desai too in each of his visit to Bombay. The things only seem different because she sees the same things in a different way. It is, indeed, different living in Chicago and she clarifies further:

Yes, it is, and that is another reason things seem different in Bombay. They are not really different, but they seem different because I’m now accustomed to the way things are in Chicago. I suppose what I am saying is that on the one hand I have changed myself, and on the other hand Chicago and Bombay are very different cities. It’s not Bombay that has changed as much as my own situation (64).

Farida, here, covertly underlines a very significant notion about ‘difference’. The difference between any two things does not make the one inferior and the other superior. The same notion is overtly discussed with Percy once, though in the context of the difference between the humanities and the sciences. She said that by admitting that the humanities were different the professors were afraid they were admitting they were inferior but the fact is “they are just, different, that’s all” (151).

To tolerate any kind of differences just by acknowledging them without any bias or prejudice is not easy for any society. When Farida confides to her Kaki about her affair with Darius, seventeen year younger to her, she draws Farida’s attention to this tendency of society to follow the set norms blindly and intolerant towards the differences of gender, class, creed, race, religion, colour, age in the matter like love, marriage or anything for that matter. Her Kaki helps Farida to understand –

“I don’t think there is anything wrong with what you are doing – except that society disapproves, and that is a huge obstacle to overcome. If it is anyone’s fault, it is the fault of society for being so rigid about who is permissible to
love and who is not – only a man and a woman, the man usually older, sometimes quite a bit older, and able to take care of his wife, and the woman is usually prettier than the man is handsome. No allowances are made for older women and younger men or rich women and poor men or Parsis and Hindus – or Muslims or Christians – or, why not? gay man.”

“And gay women?”

“Of course, gay women – but that is how society is. Anything outside the norm is simply unacknowledged – exclusion the worst punishment (361).

Ironically, Desai has not focused on the community’s fuss over Farida’s first marriage with an American. The community strongly disapproves a Parsee girl’s interfaith marriage. Farida senses the covert social disapproval the second time due to the age-bar, though the boy is a Parsee. One might assume that the American society, a different one from the Indian, may be more liberal and forward in the matter of love and marriage. It is, but it is still not very accommodative of the cultural and religious differences and also the differences in colour and gender. Farida has had bitter experiences about the publications of the novels she has written. She has faced nothing but rejections for all of her works from all the publishers she tried in America. She is very much dejected and depressed about these constant disappointments and baffled about the reasons for the constant rejections of even her better novels. When Percy asks what upsets her she explains her bewilderment about the American attitude:

No, you don’t understand. It’s much more than just me as a writer. For someone like him I’m a nonperson -- and people like him make it popular to perceive people like me as nonpersons, somehow counterfeit. If our paths crossed he wouldn’t even see me – or if he saw me he’d look right through me. I’m not the right colour. I’m not the right gender. These things make a difference to people like him (154-155).

Farida, here, resents the then American president Ronald Reagan who represents the mindset and attitude of any American. Farida blames the politically powerful people like him who makes no effort to bring change but to perpetuate the discrimination and discrepancy and hence injustice. When Percy raises a point that Farida might be getting some favour as a woman as people could not help seeing her as a woman, Farida disagrees and criticizes their hypocritical way of looking at women. It is such false chivalry that upsets her. The reason for her ire is that “for every door he opens, he closes two, for every chair he holds he removes two. He doesn’t give women a
chance for true independence because then there would be less need for men like himself – men who get their sense of worth by providing for women” (155).

It is this paternalistic and hegemonic attitude that Farida objects to. Farida’s rage targets the authority which has the power to transform but does not do anything. In fact, he has made his attitudes acceptable in the country at large because he is himself an affable man. He is such an agreeable messenger that people like Farida, all and sundry, are willing to swallow his disagreeable messages. He has made sexism and greed and intolerance seem virtuous. And that is why he is responsible for so much of what is wrong with the country. She is angry that the root of all her problems is that she is not an ‘authentic American’ or she would not have to face the discrimination at her work place or to receive a series of rejections from the publishers or to undergo an acid test convincing the university authorities to pass her through her post-graduate course in Creative Writing despite her brilliant attempts at creative writing. May be for Horace too, she is an exotic creature and her marriage could not last long because she refused not to resist. May be at this stage Farida herself is not very clearly aware that she is fighting racism and her despair is nothing but the “ethnic anxiety”, a common lot for all the immigrants from the East.

Despite her capability and vivacity, Farida feels she is losing the ground. Her deep down melancholia makes her feel diminished and inferior to the Americans, even to Percy to whom she has been very much grateful for his help. She is thankful for his invitation to a reading group’s discussion on Rushdie’s *Midnight’s children* but she is diffident to go and mix with the people because she had been too long alone. Trusting her own self so little she no longer trusts men who wishes for her company; and prefers solitude. She feels she has unnecessarily isolated herself. Parsees are a minority in India, in America a minority within a minority (Parsees among Indians among Americans); and she had distanced herself not only from the community of Parsees and the Indians in America, but from all the institutions that provided stability: family, religion, country. They all had their pros and cons, but in dispensing with the cons, i.e. the intolerance and bigotry that come with too much pride in one’s own institutions; she had dispensed as well with the pros, i.e. the wellbeing instilled by the same institutions. Feroza in *Brat* falls back on her religion after the possibility of her marriage with David is ripped off, though she prefers to stay back in America
awaiting another possibility. She too, decides not to let her family and country interfere any more. Farida had long accepted the pinch of being a woman and a minority; she could hardly deny her gender and race, but her descent into the bowels of the proletariat had awakened her with a thump when she had finally landed. She had been too long accustomed to luxury to accept with ease that she was now an outsider, relegated to the back door and the kindness of the strangers. She had never before accepted as fully the failure of her life, but her cocoon of solitude had revealed how very selfishly she had lived. She accepted that she had earned in full measure her misery and loneliness, but there were times when the reality overwhelmed her (157-58).

Abruptly and awkwardly departing from Percy, she just steps out of an elevator and scurries to a rest-room and cries hysterically giving vent to her frustration and helplessness. Desai himself had undergone a long struggle before getting recognition as a writer trying his hand at various kinds of roles from a bartender to a dish-washer to earn his livelihood in America. In all the three protagonists of Desai--Noshir, Homi and Farida--one finds the autobiographical resemblance and in their speculations and reactions is found the reflection of Desai himself. Farida’s downfall from the uppermost stratum of society in India to the lower in America has been quite painful. She is embarrassed to invite Percy to her small den-like studio. Neither the Blue Mansion of Bombay nor the Hyde Park house of Horace can be called her home. She is no longer a Cooper; she descended from a Cooper to a ‘non’. She couldn’t go back, not after what her mother had done to her. She had renounced her rightful inheritance and they had stopped corresponding, but she kept in touch with Kaki. Farida, whose presence was always felt, had become a self-effacing person shrinking further into her skin, becoming a smaller person yet, losing heart and confidence, losing humour, no longer the person who stuck her foot in her mouth with impunity, nor stood up for herself.

The excessive physical and mental stress takes toll on Farida’s health and she faints in the apartment of Percy’s friends where they had come to attend the symposium on Rushdie. Percy understands her problem and tries to help her. He guesses that Farida’s problem is the American market which is not interested in the content of Farida’s novels, i.e. India, the Oriental ‘other’ and hence not ready to publish them. He suggests a solution to try at England and send the manuscripts there. He advises her to take advantage of the old colonial ties. They are more interested in their old
colonies than America will ever be – for reasons of nostalgia, guilt, and sentiments, whatever. And to Farida’s surprise, it works. Ultimately, her novels are selected for publication. The world is not totally hopeless for Farida. The new avenues are opening up and also she would be enrolled once again to complete her Master’s Degree in Creative Writing. Every dark cloud has a silver lining. Her bad time is going to be over soon and her dream to earn recognition on her own would very soon come true. Also at the end she meets the man with fuller maturity and a greater understanding in Percy. She begins to understand what Kaki had said: “A loving person is a loved person, and a loved person is a loving person”. That had always been Percy’s way, and she wished to make it hers too (412).

Her experiences have definitely widened her perspective. She knows that love transcends all the differences but this time the realization is with a difference, i.e. maturity. Gradually, she has become more and more Americanized. On her tour to Japan with her mother, Farida gets acquainted with a family from New Zealand. It surprised Farida that she had been mistaken for an American from her accents as it was perhaps more American than Indian. Farida happily takes the compliment that she sounds like an American (298). Her process of acculturation has made her into a more tolerant person. But still she loves India and has not forgotten anything. When she gives hefty alms to a beggar in Bombay, Ratan tells her, “You are looking at India with the eyes of an American”. It is not acceptable to Farida. She explains to him, “…don’t tell me I have forgotten what it is like. If anything, I can look at India with the eyes of an Indian and the eyes of an American” – and that is less insular vision than someone who can see only with the eyes of an Indian (180). She had more in common with both the cultures than either an Indian or an American, but less in common with either culture than a native of either country (89-90). She snaps at Ratan and she becomes the mouthpiece of Desai satirizing his own kind:

You don’t know any better. You are like so many of us Parsis, talking about how liberated we are, but when faced with the truth, when faced with the prospect of the mixed marriage, whether with a white or a black or a yellow or a Hindu or a Muslim or a Christian or a whatever, they revert to the old conservative arguments: we only want what’s best for you; we are only thinking about your best interest -- but what they’re really doing is fighting for a way of life that is vanishing, a reality that should never have been a reality, but one with which they have now grown too comfortable to part. …but it’s
really selfishness. The old order always fears the new: the old is threatened by the new because the new reminds the old that it is dispensable – that it is on its way out (190).

Through Farida, Desai criticizes the rigidity and insularity of Parsee community, siding with the reformists, though here he makes just the passing comment on it, not dealing it in depth and detail like Sidhwa does in *Brat* where her female protagonist decides to marry an American. The paradoxical attitudes of the Parsees, as Novy Kapadia has pointed out, leave this community a confused lot. The dichotomy between the orthodox and the liberal believers needs to be resolved for their survival. Farida represents her community. Despite her acculturation into a ‘fake or a counterfeit’ American she is hardly seen boasting of it before her Indian people. The ‘authentic and genuine’ Americans are only who are born there. For the first generation of the immigrants it is not possible to be like genuine Americans but it may be possible for their next generations to come. The acculturation is possible only to a certain extent as their birth and breeding in their native country cannot be undone. For the first generation like Farida or Feroza or Manek or Homi-Rusi or even Rohini and her husband Rohit, the conflict continues as they crave for the identification with the original American which is impossible. For Rohini’s doctor husband Rohit, who does very well in his profession, Farida does not resemble the Americans with whom he wished to identify. Hence, she aroused in him nothing but conflict. The anxiety and crisis for the identity surface when Farida thanks him in hospital for helping her in trouble during her abortion and also her mental trauma. He acknowledges her gratefulness with a smile when she says, “– such an American you have turned out to be, hard outside, soft inside, all bluff and red – like a broiled lobster” (343). Nothing pleased him better than to be called an American. Considering the Western as superior and themselves inferior is the complex that has self-victimized the Indians and has made their colonization possible. And among the Indians the Parsees’ admiration for the white people knew no bounds; it was almost blind. Nariman Cooper, Farida’s father is all praises not only for the English lady, Flora Diver, whom he flirts with, but also for all the Britishers. About their quitting India, he opines:

“If you ask me, that will be the end of India. If the British go, India goes with them. What do they know about running a country? They have never done it before” (234).
He spoke as if he were not an Indian himself, as if the British departure would be his own, as if an India without the British were no longer his country. The irony in one of his friend’s polite but firm remark is very clear: “They say when the British leave; they will leave behind many brownskinned Englishmen. I think they might know something about running a country” (234).

During the British colonization the process of acculturation had penetrated deep within the psyche of the Indian consciousness, partially coerced and partially voluntary too, let apart the Parsees being their old pals right from the beginning. The assault of the foreign culture is thus possible within one’s own country without crossing the geographical boundaries. Even before the Britishers, the Indian history had witnessed the coercion of the Islamic rulers on the Indian subjects. The Parsees themselves had come to the Indian shore seeking refuge away from religious persecution by the Arabs. In India of course, they have not indulged in proselytization as per the conditions exchanged between the Jadav Rana of Sanjan and the then Parsee leaders. But their voluntary acculturation in their adopted home by the British was possible because of their infatuation for the white skin and their language. The crisis created in their identity during the post-independence period has been accentuated by their recent craze for the West in the late 20th century. The process of decolonization had made them uncomfortable as they were losing their prominence. For their survival and peaceful existence they had so far followed the Zoroastrian dictum to side with the rulers. But now with the recent trend of immigration, the younger generation of Parsees faces the complexity of the issue of their identity. Despite the hybridization of their culture, first in India by the natives in Gujarat and later by their westernization, they want to be recognized neither as Indians nor Americans or any other nationality for that matter, but as Parsees. They are different and of course insular but not aliens. They do want to be the part of the existent society but at the same time also to flaunt their identity as the different other. Farida prefers to wear Sari, as her Gujarati friend Rohini does, in USA to conform to her identity as Indian but when she is in Bombay, she is back to her western dresses to assert her American identity. Farida strives to be different both in India and America, a sort of othering herself, and at the same time part of the local milieu. To negate her identity as a non-resident Parsee woman, highly westernized, she takes care to show her belongingness to India, especially in the public meetings as when she meets Mr. Naik from the Bombay Municipal Corporation “She had worn a Sari to the meeting to show
her solidarity with India, and chappals as much for their convenience as not to tower over the great numbers of short men. She also spoke the best Hindi she could remember, knowing her effort would be appreciated despite her faltering tone and Americanized accent, and returned all smiles more broadly than they were given…” (366). Even after being so Americanized, she does not want to be cut off from her roots and isolated from the society in which she was born. Mingling with the friend circle of Darius she says: “… - but I am much more interested now in Bombay life – What people think, how they think. It is all so alien to me now. I want to know what you think” (76). This is the crux of the expatriates’ anxiety. They live dual lives paralleled with dual or multiple identities in different slots of their life-span. One may find it discomforting but this is the existential reality one has to accept with positive attitude.

Farida’s plight as a woman and as a Parsee woman and as a Parsee immigrant woman is understood no better by anybody but Percy and is taken in the right spirit. The differences of gender, culture, age, race and religion dissolve and there emerges a foolproof understanding of each other as persons. They discuss a lot on the matter of love, man-woman relationship and their positions in society, marriage, religion and so on and so forth. Farida believes that there is nothing wrong in a woman bringing home the bacon for her man to cook. They talk about the social and religious aspects of marriage. Desai paraphrases it:

What was good about religion was what was common to all religions: Love. What was bad about religion was what was not common, what made adherents antagonistic – at worst, warlike, ready to kill in the name of God. Much better to accept what was common to all, reject what was not, maintain faith in God, not religion (410 – 411).

And Desai thinks that there is something to be said for marrying one’s own kind, within one’s faith, marriage being difficult enough without alien and foreign influences, but not for making a virtue of kind and faith, particularly when it trumped love. Besides, the Parsees, inbred for centuries, are a dying race, losing numbers of lower birthrates, intermarriages, emigration, but still they cling to the failed ways, allowing no conversions, insisting on racial purity for communicants.
Expressing his admiration for Farida Percy compliments her that she has proved her mettle in resisting the stereotypes and has the courage of conviction to go against the tide. Percy, a widower in his sixties and Farida, a divorcee in her fifties with a number of disappointments in her affairs find each other mature enough to get along well. Percy made it no secret. He wanted for her what she wanted for herself. If she wished, they could marry; if not, it made no difference. Desai very aptly states that the huge mistake had always been equating marriage with love when each often survived without the other, and unfortunately marriage rather than love had the sanction of society. The blandishments of marriage had long ceased to exist for Farida and companionship would always be soothing for the acute loneliness both of them felt. But at least she is sure that before Percy she had never loved anybody as a woman in full. She can be questioned if she could become a woman in full without becoming a mother, but she has come to terms with her dilemma. And as a woman in full, she too thinks, she would marry him gladly if he wished, or live with him or live in an adjoining apartment. She had grown to like, even enjoy, her solitary life, but Percy was not a man to crowd a house, an apartment, or even a room. Both of them respected the individuality of each other and believed in imparting space to each other. “Not motherhood, but personhood, determined the woman in full – and for Percy, no less, not fatherhood, not manhood, but personhood” (418 – 19).

To treat the other as a person, as a human being irrespective of the gender, race, religion, class, colour, nationality or any such thing is very important. The differences merge into a broader outlook. Farida feels the discomfort in the chauvinist hegemony of Horace and also in the inexperienced conventional protection of Darius. Only Percy’s mature and open-minded proximity lends Farida the comfort she longs for. It is very important that Percy, an American white male, is free from any bias or prejudice against the foreigner, Farida, an expatriate woman from the East. What Farida once explains to her friend Rohini about Derrida’s theory very well can conclude this point. Farida paraphrases his theory of deconstruction and according to him we are all prisoners of our perspectives. We can see things only from our own point of view, but if we see things only from one point of view, then all other points of view become marginalized. He goes on to say that this central point of view is of course only a partial view, and we should try to correct it – and this we should do by wilfully subjecting it to one of the marginalized points of view. Then both points of
view, central and marginalized, coalesce to become a new central point of view, which in turn is subjected to yet another marginalized point of view, which in turn is coalesced again – and so on and so forth, thus broadening our original perception, the point being to continually broaden our perceptions. Actually, it is a noble attempt to adopt different perspectives. Like Hegel’s proposition of thesis and antithesis to synthesis which becomes a new thesis, this theory can be applied not only to language, literature or any text but also to the individuals, or any institutions like marriage, family, community, society, religion or even a country or nation and even to the whole globe. For example, in a Christian society Christians form the centre, and all non-Christians are marginalized – all Hindus, Muslims, Jews, Zoroastrians are marginalized and as per Derrida’s suggestion we keep on adding the marginalized perspectives to the central perspective to obtain a larger centre and eventually erasing the difference between the centre and the margin. Every centre implies a margin, and to understand the centre better we approach it from the margin, from the outside – to be objective. So, to continue with the example, to broaden our understanding of Christianity, we should approach it from the perspective of Islam or Hinduism or any other non-Christian religion. The point is to maximize the meaning – to understand the matter at hand as fully as possible (311). This approach to understand from the others’ perspective would be possible only on the ground of respect for the other. Such objective stance, in turn, would result in making a strife-free globe.

WORKS CITED:


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