MEHER PESTONJI: PERSONAL INTERVIEW, 17TH JAN 2009

Q: What made you interested in becoming a freelance writer?
A: When my marriage ended I had two small children aged 4 and 5. I had graduated in psychology but was under-qualified for a job. Then a friend said 'your letters are so interesting. Why don't you do something with language?' I joined journalism classes and opted for flexi-time to be with the kids when they got home from school.

Q: Do you think the work of art you have produced contains semi-autobiographical element?
A: Not journalism which teaches you about the outside world and where you have to be objective. Its different with fiction. Several stories in my first collection 'Mixed Marriage and other Parsi Stories' are based on personal experience. These reflect a moving away from the conservative ethos of my Parsi upbringing to the new experiences of a world opened up by journalism, feminism and the values of social justice and equality.

The novel 'Pervez' also has autobiographical elements. I was involved in the Left movement during the build-up to the demolition of Babri Masjid and personally witnessed riots in bastis around Bombay. Many of my experiences have been fictionalized into the narrative of the book.

The second novel 'Sadak Chhaap' tells the story of a street-child from his point of view. It has roots in the many articles on street-kids I wrote as a journalist but no element of autobiography.

My first play 'Piano for Sale' features two women with a common past – they have been in love with the same man. Here, the personal is overshadowed by feminist thought wherein the bonding between women occurs despite the pain each has inflicted on the other.

My second play 'Feeding Crows' tackles urban issues, at first humorously, then moves into deeper areas of the psyche and the clash between current imperatives and traditional norms. There is nothing autobiographical in it but it does express my contemporary concerns.

Q As a journalist and as a writer what difference do you find on ethical grounds?
A: Ethics are an integral part of who you are, what you do, where you come from. They get reflected in what you write whether its as a journalist or in fiction. The ethic of being a good journalist is objectivity. Regardless of your personal biases your job is to report what you see truthfully, dispassionately. This isn't always easy esp. when one has strong views. Eg if you are assigned to interview a politician whose views you strongly condemn. Or when you have to review the work of a friend.

As a fiction writer I have the freedom to choose the issues I want to highlight. But I want my characters to be credible, not good/bad, black/white caricatures representing political positions. They have to be human with some strengths, some weaknesses. That's the truth of what we are. A truth that involves searching for an element of good even while depicting a villain.
Q: What compelled you to criticize the Parsi community?
A: Historically I believe we are going through a period when it is important for each of us – whether Parsi, or Hindu, or Muslim or Christian - to critically re-examine our roots, our cultures, to weed out ideas and practices that are not consonant with rational, scientific thought which is the hallmark of contemporary life. My critique of the community stemmed initially from the change in my perspective as I moved away from the narrow world in which I'd been ensconced and saw Parsis as others look at us. From childhood I had friends who were Parsis and friends who were not. My 'best friends' in school were a Punjabi girl (who's now a professor at Harvard University), a Jewish girl (who migrated to Australia) and a Parsi girl (who currently lives in London). Besides them we had a group of Parsi girls and boys who met regularly, a group of Jewish boys and girls who met on Fridays after breaking the Sabbath, and in college mixed groups where nobody bothered which community anyone came from. My growing up years were holistic, secular, integrated. The conflict with Parsis came shortly after my divorce and my entering journalism, which, in those days, was a poorly paying profession. Relatives advised me to learn short-hand/typing and take up a well-paying secretarial job. My Parsi friends with whom I'd had a hectic social life while I was married, disapproved of my socializing as a single woman, inviting male friends over, returning late night. Many thought my venturing into slums or writing about street-kids was sheer folly. These conflicts came to a head during the post Babri Masjid riots of 1992-93. A young Muslim boy, who does excellent work with streetkids, was stranded with his family in a housing colony dominated by Shiv Sainiks. The local corporator had been killed. Violence was expected at the time of her funeral. Altaf and his family had to be rescued before the funeral but none of my activist friends had cars in which someone could go, get them out. Almost all my Parsi friends had cars. I appealed to them. There were still a few hours before the funeral. We could get to Tardeo and back in no time. Parsis, being neither Hindu nor Muslim, might be able to get away with driving into an area that would be risky for the warring communities. Or so I believed. When every single Parsi friend refused my disillusionment reached the pits. This incident forms the opening sequence of my story 'Riot' in 'Mixed Marriage'.

Q: What is wrong with the Parsi community?
A: I am not the right person to answer this question. Every community has its strengths and weaknesses. I believe the role of the writer is to provoke discussion and debate and not merely extol the virtues of the community as some Parsi writers tend to do.

Q: There is a controversy about your statement 'accidentally born Parsi' in your poem that's a prelude to 'Mixed Marriage and other Parsi Stories'. What exactly did you mean?
A: All birth is accidental. We do not decide who or where we are born. I use the phrase partly to underline my alienation from the community by not wearing the sudra-kusti, the holy emblems of our religion, (as quoted in the poem) and partly to stress the element of chance in who we are, to demolish the myth of Brahmanical-like superiority that seems to infect many Parsis.
Q: What factors make Parsis a minority community?

A: Purely numbers. The Parsis are an endangered race. There are less than a hundred thousand Parsis in the world – hope that figure is right – and a large part of that population is 60 plus, leading even UNESCO to declare Parsis as endangered. But it needs to be recognized that Parsis are a privileged minority. They are privileged economically, they are privileged educationally, they are privileged socially. Moreover philanthropists of the community take great pride in looking after weaker sections. I have never come across a Parsi street-kid, or a Parsi family living in slums. I stress this because I think it is unethical for the community to demand concessions on the basis on numerical weakness when they have all the means to qualify and compete as equals with anyone on their own strength.

Q: Do you agree that Parsis have submerged themselves in Indian life and culture?

A: Parsi involvement in Indian life and culture has to be seen at two levels at different points of history. We had stalwarts of the freedom movement like Dadabhoy Naoroji, Ferozshah Mehta, Madame Cama, but by and large the community was pro-British. More than once there were anti-Parsi riots when the community supported the Brits against nationalists. So there was a divide between Parsi freedom fighters and the community at large. Coming to contemporary times Parsis have contributed to the growth of India in many areas of expertise. Several generations of the Tatas in business, Homi Bhabha the great scientist, Sam Maneckshaw the great soldier, Nani Palkhivala, the great jurist. Leading doctors, leading lawyers. In the creative world there have been the great portrait painters Bomanji Pithavala, there's Pandit Firose Dastur, of the gwalior gharana, Astad Deboo the dancer, Dadi Pudumjee the puppeteer, Sooni Taraporevala scriptwriter-turned filmmaker, Arzan Khambata, sculptor, poets Adil Jussavala, Keki Daruvala. Each of these have contributed to the richness of contemporary Indian culture.

Q: Have traditional Parsis accepted your ideas?

A: All over the world and all through history liberals and traditionalists argue, argue, argue. Since I don't want to get into arguments with those who unlikely to change their views any more than I am, I keep away from traditional Parsis.

Q: What changes do you think the Parsi community needs to go through on social and cultural levels?

A: The last few years have seen a face-off between traditionalists and liberals in the community, particularly in regard to inter-marriage and allowing children of mixed marriages to become Zoroastrian. This is a healthy confrontation. Unless the community opens its doors it will become extinct even earlier than anticipated.
Q: Do you agree with the views of other Parsi writers on the community?
A: With the community's declining numbers and ecologically endangered status Parsi writers tend to get caught in a web of nostalgia. Those who have set down roots in the West pin their success on exoticising poverty-related issues. It would be good to see younger writers looking at Parsis squarely for what they are, taking up issues the community needs to grapple with and challenge traditionalists. My play 'Feeding Crows' tackles what is probably the most contentious issue facing the community today. The Zoroastrian religion dates back before Christ. Some of the practices initiated by prophet Zarathushtra were valid for his time in history but are completely invalid in contemporary urban situations. I refer to dokhmenishin, the system of disposing off dead bodies. Traditionally Parsis are mandated to dispose off their dead by leaving the body on a mountaintop or in the jungle to be devoured by vultures. This was a way of returning to nature without polluting the earth. It was also the ultimate act of charity, donating one's body to the animal kingdom. Is it feasible to keep such a practice alive in contemporary urban areas where it is virtually impossible to sustain a vulture population? Currently the traditionalists and rationalists of the community are hotly debating the issue. The dokhmenshin system survives only in Bombay, Karachi and perhaps a few cities with sizable Parsi populations. Parsis who die abroad or in places where there are no dokhmas, are either buried or cremated. 'Feeding Crows' takes on the debate regardless of offending sections of the community.

Q: Do you believe in mixed marriages?
A: Absolutely. Mixed marriages are invariably the result of love, of choice. Which is a comfortable base for a child to grow into. Moreover the child is exposed to two cultures - different kinds of food, different languages, different festivals, different ways of viewing the world - from the cradle of its own home. Implicit in this, is that he/she grows up with a wider perspective, tolerance for differences, openness to absorb a variety of experiences encountered in the outside world. All of which makes him/her a more sensitive global citizen. Look at Barrack Obama. What a wonderful product a mixed marriage has produced!

Q: Was 'Sadak Chhaap' meant to visualize social reform for children?
A: 'Sadak Chhaap' grew out of my journalistic writings on street children. From the mid 80s I had been writing about streetkids - their needs, maltreatment of kids, ngo projects, films for and about kids, etc Very little of the book is pure fiction (other than the central idea of finding an abandoned baby on a railway platform). Stories I've heard from children in the streets have been incorporated. Rahul, the protagonist, is the amalgamation of several kids I've met over the years. The book was written at a time when the Indian economy was opening out and street people pushed out of sight. Literally, as with the tourism police protecting tourists from beggars but not our kids from foreign paedophiles. With 'Sadak Chhaap' I wanted to highlight Bombay's underbelly that urban planners wish away without doing anything to confront the harshness of its reality.
Q: What steps would you take to improve the life of slumdwellers and poor children?
A: First, recognize they exist and are an integral part of urban society. Our fruit and vegetable vendors, bread-walla, baida-walla, our domestic help, taxi-drivers, peons, municipal school teachers... all live in slums – because urban housing is unaffordable. Cities could not function without their services. Only when planners recognize this and design development plans reflecting the slum population’s views will there be meaningful change.

Q: How was your trip to Germany? What did you gain?
A: The trip was very good. My first lecture tour taught me I could push beyond known boundaries. Physically as well as intellectually.
For the first time in my life I was in zero degrees temperature in Luneberg, North Germany. I had never expected to survive such cold. Another physical parameter was breached by the pace. Morning travel, reach new city by lunchtime, lecture, dinner with hosts, sleep. Next morning repeat. Exhausting but it kept me alert and stimulated.
Intelligently it was enriching to talk to people who had read up on India and were cued in to so many aspects of Indian life. Among Germans there's a genuine interest in preparing their students to deal with the India of tomorrow and that provided much stimulus for discussions.

Q: What are your views about Muslims as a minority community?
A: One’s attitudes do get influenced with the changing scenario. Throughout the nineties, with the Babri Masjid and Gujerat massacres coming one after the other, my sympathies were entirely with Muslims, the victims. But I have to admit that with periodic acts of violence the over-arching emotion of sympathy abates.
We know it is extremists and not the community which is to be blamed. That Hindu extremists can be equally ruthless to suit political ambitions. So it is extremely important to isolate extremists of both communities. Moderate voices must assert themselves and clearly distance the mainstream community from those who wreck havoc in the name of religion.

Q: In general what are your views on humanity, about riots in Bombay?
A: I am naturally drawn to the side of the victim. Whoever that victim may be. I was active as a journalist during the Bombay riots where I saw violence, bloodshed on an unimaginable scale. That touched me to the bone. Images remained ingrained in my mind’s eye for months. Often depriving me of sleep. Many of these experiences have been incorporated in ‘Pervez’.

Q: What are you currently working on?
A: I have started on a novel but its too premature to talk about it other than saying its partly set in Germany but mainly in Bombay.
Q: What led to the banning of your novel ‘Pervez’?
A: ‘Pervez’ has not been banned. People don’t know about it because it was just not marketed – a better way of killing a book. ‘Pervez’ traces the intellectual maturation of a young Parsi girl against the backdrop of the buildup to the Babri Masjid demolition. Since the girl is neither Hindu nor Muslim she tries to take a rational, balanced view of unfolding events. The book was in press when the Gujerat riots broke out and in the face of the holocaust unleashed there the balanced tone of the book felt vapid, weak. I added an epilogue decidedly on the side of Muslim victims ending with a plea for a coming together of both communities. In the face of the tension prevailing at that time I guess the publishers didn’t want to risk the book creating a storm. So they simply let it sit on the shelves.

Q: You have also written plays for the stage. What message do you wish to communicate?
A: My play ‘Feeding Crows’ tackles what is probably the most contentious issue facing the Parsi community today. The Zoroastrian religion dates back before Christ. Some of the practices initiated by prophet Zarathushtra were valid for his time in history but are completely invalid in contemporary urban situations. I refer to dokhmenishin, the system of disposing off dead bodies. Traditionally Parsis are mandated to dispose off their dead by leaving the body on a mountaintop or in the jungle to be devoured by vultures. This was a way of returning to nature without polluting the earth. It was also the ultimate act of charity, donating one’s body to the animal kingdom. Is it feasible to keep such a practice alive in contemporary urban areas where it is virtually impossible to sustain a vulture population? Currently the traditionalists and rationalists of the community are hotly debating the issue. The dokhmenshin system survives only in Bombay, Karachi and perhaps a few cities with sizable Parsi populations. Parsis who die abroad or in places where there are no dokhmas, are either buried or cremated. ‘Feeding Crows’ takes on the debate regardless of offending sections of the community.

Q: You have said you like the story ‘The Gift’ from ‘Mixed Marriage’. Why?
A: ‘The Gift’ is not a political story. It’s a tender relationship between a ten year old girl and her maid, the poignant pain of watching her beloved maid get married and leave. Our family have always had long term domestic help. As a child I was particularly close to my maid Maggie, a relationship that endured long after she left us - right into my adulthood and Maggie’s grandmotherhood.
Q: What message do you want to give the younger generation?
A: I am nobody to give messages. Technology has widened the breach between generations to such an extent that few youngsters ant to hear ‘messages’ from elders.

What I would advocate is an honestly questioning mind. Take nothing at face value just because some authority figure said it. Reason out the situation and if you disagree with something be unafraid to speak out.

To illustrate: I was lucky that I became a journalist in the mid 70s when the women’s movement was just taking off. Mathura, a fifteen year old girl had been brutally raped by three policemen in a police station and women’s groups were demanding a change in the rape laws. Till then all accused were considered innocent till proved guilty, proof depended on evidence such as an eyewitness and the law maintained that a girl who was not a virgin could not be raped.

I plunged into the women’s campaign much to the chagrin of my Parsi friends. I vividly remember an argument with a lawyer friend who sneered “do you bunch of women think you know better than the stalwarts who drafted the Constitution of India!” Well yes, we did. When the rape laws were finally changed I learnt one of the most important lessons of my life: Nothing is sacrosanct. Do your own thinking. Question everything.
Q. Being a Surgeon by Profession what interested you in fiction writing?
Ans: Surgery is a precise world of skills that are learned through painstaking study and effort and then practised day after day. Once you have mastered the skills, they stay with you for life. The life of a surgeon is busy and often full of stress. Apart from my surgical brain I also have a relaxed and dreamy part to me and I think I was only making use of it.

Q. Do you think the work of art which you have produced, contains semi-autobiographical elements? (With reference to ‘on the Hills of Anghers’)
Ans: In Hills of Angheri I have used surgical situations and scenes which are either from my own life or what I have observed or heard of. The personal life of Nalli, the protagonist, is fiction. I always make it a point to say this during my readings.

Q. As a surgeon by profession and as a writer what difference to do you find on ethical grounds.
Ans: What ethical grounds do you mean? That I might slander someone’s image? That I never do and it would be more appropriate to do that as non-fiction.

Q. What compels you to criticize the orthodox of your own community?
Ans: If you mean The Scent of Pepper I’m always puzzled by such remarks. I haven’t criticised the community but spoken the truth as I see it. I love my community very much but it is not my business to flatter my people or anyone else. (If at all I flatter someone insincerely, you can rest assured it will be a person I dislike!) My job is to open the windows wide and let the reader look inside.

Q. You have written many award winning stories for children, what are your further steps to improve the life of children?
Ans: I don’t have any such mission. But one of the things I do is run the Nalanda Trust along with a small group of friends and my husband, Vijay. We provide non-formal education to underprivileged children and we run libraries. The libraries are meant for children from all social strata. Through regularly held competitions and discussions, we aim to instil a better sense of values, tolerance and sensitivity. We’re doing this work in Lonavla, Hyderabad, Vrindaban in UP and soon in Madras slums.

Q. Have you ever thought, you will be shortlisted for Man Asian Literary Price?
Ans: The idea when writing is always to give your best to it and I only have a reader in mind. Even that, vaguely. One might think of awards much later but not in any serious way. There is too much else going on in life!
Q. What are your personal ideas about the book ‘The Story That Must Not Be Told’ Is there any real widow whom you are referring to.
Ans: When you read the novel you will see its point. And no, Simon Jesukumaran is a fictional character.

Q. Do you believe in Mixed marriage?
Ans: Indeed, I do. Arranged marriages within one’s community also work in many instances but in a majority of cases, it is bound too much by tradition and custom which help hold two people together. Mixed marriage is much more challenging and it stimulates emotional and cultural growth. In fact, I feel that if we had more mixed marriages (at least one in every family which everyone accepts) we will soon be able to wipe out the communal hatred and suspicion which is the bane of our lives.

Q. You have been in England for so many years what compelled you to come back to India?
Ans: I never thought otherwise. I loved my years of training in England, I made life-long friends but our country with its huge disparities in every field was always the place for me. I like visiting England when the opportunity arises; and I’m glad to come back.

Q. Do you agree with the views and ideas of Meher Pertonji and other Indian women writers?
Ans: This is too broad a question to merit an answer, I’m sorry. I don’t know what you mean.

Q. What are your views about muslim community as minority?
Ans: They are an important minority and have contributed so much to our culture and way of life. Take that away and our blood will become that much more water. Music, art, language, food, clothes and customs – they have all be assimilated by the majority which has thereby been enriched. The same with all other minority religions of India. Religious fundamentalism and the twisted interpretations of the Quran are another matter altogether and need to be dealt with urgently.

Q. What are the books you are working on?
Ans: A non-fiction book titled Why is Health a Luxury Item?
My next novel which is of course still only cerebral.

Q. Do you agree that medical Register is an integral part of your prose style ?
Ans: Medicine (and surgery) is my other great passion. Naturally it will affect my style. Not just that I often have medical characters but that my descriptions are often very visceral.

Q. You have written so many books, which one do you like the most?
Ans: It would be too presumptuous to think or speak of it.
Q. Has the traditional community accepted your views and ideas.
Ans: I only know what I get to read or hear from my readers. There is no single community speaking to me about my work. As for my own community, nowadays, every time I go home, at least ten persons will tell me how much they loved *The Scent of Pepper* or some other novel.

Q. Through your writings do you want to bring change in human understanding?
Ans: There is no such aim. But if anything I write at all touches some feeling so it leans ever so slightly towards some betterment, I’m content.

Q. What message / advice do you want to give to young generation?
Ans: I hate to give advice because I hardly took advice when I was young! Perhaps, if I had to, I’d tell them to take interest in some form of art or the humanities. Art does not force you to do anything, it does not demand. It only reveals. Art helps to make people more liberal minded, more open to the other person’s point of view.

Q. What are your views about colonial and postcolonial literature?
Ans: Why not precolonial literature too? I hate such compartments and not being literary cannot pass any judgement. I have liked writing from both periods.

Q. What inspires you to write so many books for adults and children?
Ans: It is an addiction.

Q. Do you think Lonawala is the best place to sit and writer as Meher Pestonji feels?
Ans: I don’t think so. All I need is the time, a cup of tea at hand and no phone calls. I can write anywhere. In my life, long periods of free time are rare so I’ve learned to make do with twenty minutes, thirty minutes to an hour.

Q. Please say something on your works, which could help me in my research work.
Ans: Ask questions and I’ll try to answer.

Q. Do you, as a writer, grasp condition of life in Colonial and Post-colonial terms?
Ans: I don’t put myself in any compartment when I write. I’m never self-conscious about the period. Why should I be?

Q. What kind of research do you expect the young generation should carry on your writing?
Ans: Again, I’m not qualified to comment or advise.
Q. ‘On the Wings of Butterflies’ deals with the problems and plight of the women how far do you think this is correct? Is there any organization like WOW or is it superficial / fictional.

Ans: *On Wings of Butterflies is an attempt at comic farce* – that is, looking at serious subject in quite a different, irreverant manner. We have enough serious tomes on the subject to fill a library. A fresh perspective helps understand various shades of the argument. I think humour, even black humour and exaggerated irony are needed in these times of too much seriousness about religion, caste, gender and so on.

Of course there is no such organisation, although there have been ideas, even modest attempts. Some years ago, it was tried in Andra Pradesh to fight elections. A senior and much-loved writer and poet once told me that it was her dream to start a women’s Party. It never happened. WOW is both superficial and fictional. I try to show both sides of the gender issue; to bring out the fact that women often fall in big tie-ups because they’re also very emotionally involved and cannot bury their differences and work together. Men do it better because they’re more cold and distanced. More than any of this, I have tried to highlight the beginning and the progression of the patriarchal conditioning of society.

Q. How much time do you spare with your family? You said you write daily only for two / hours in the morning and two hours in the evening.

Ans: Always, family life has flowed along with my two vocations, and quite happily so. My daughter got quite used to it. Vijay, being a writer, understands. This is not to say that there haven’t been complaints and grumblings about the fact that I’m a less than perfect mother, wife, housekeeper. One can make it work. I don’t write four hours a day. More like one to two hours a day. I might occasionally manage longer, like on a Sunday. But that’s rare.

Q. Do you want to say something about the research that had been carried on your writings?

Ans: I’m not qualified to do so. I’m happy when someone takes it up. But when there are four or five different scholars wanting your time, it is hard to help them with answers. Where’s the time?

Q. How do you perceive the status of Indian Writing in English, in the Post-colonial Indian context?

Ans: We have great stories to tell but we haven’t been bold enough with the language. We’re too easily satisfied with good sales, good advances and a profile on the literary scene. One must write for a larger audience; be more ambitious about our contribution to the future of the written word; and we must never, never be contained within geographic boundaries.