Meher Pestonji lives in Bombay (Mumbai). She has campaigned extensively for a change in rape laws, housing rights for slum dwellers, and a more sensitive understanding of street children and their special needs. A freelance journalist Meher Pestonji has participated in the campaign to change rape law in the 70s and worked for Slum dweller’s housing rights, children’s right, anti-communalism campaigns and detailed reporting on the Sri-Krishanan Commission instituted to investigate the Bombay riots of 1992-1993. When her marriage broke up, she chose freelance journalism in spite of its inherent financial insecurity.

In an interview at Radio Club when she was asked the reason for becoming freelance writer, Pestonji replied:

What made you interested in becoming a freelance writer? She said, “When my marriage ended I had two small children aged 4 and 5 years. 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.”

She further said: “After my divorce, I became a freelance journalist and came into contact with a different set of attitudes, contrary to those of my childhood friends. There was a split in thinking of my identity. Being a journalist and a Parsi are two separate things
and often these clashed. My perception as a journalist prevailed over any kind of loyalty to my community, which I don’t have.” Pestonji calls herself ‘accidentally born a Parsi.’

_Once I said it with pride_
_I don’t wear a sudra_
_Or Kusti_
_I don’t read or write_
_Gujarati_
_Just about speak it_
_I’m only accidentally born_
_a Parsi._

_It was the right thing to say_
_To the foreign returned jet set_
_I say the same with diffidence now rather_
_Reluctantly._

_I took years to discover_
_You can’t escape roots in search of_
_an identity._

Meher Pestonji comes from a conservative Parsi family but never wanted herself to be associated being a ‘Parsi’. She felt she was accidentally born in ‘Parsi’ family. Hence, in each story she directly or indirectly highlights a negative trait of the Parsis, she criticizes Parsis’ in more than one story. When people of her community and other communities joined hands against her and shouted slogans on her statement that she made in her poem that is written on the first page of _Mixed Marriage and other Parsi Stories_ that she is accidentally born a Parsi. She says, I mean:

_All birth are accidental. We do not decide who or where we are born. I use the phrase partly to underline my alienation from the community 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 infects many Parsis._

Meher Pestonji tries to seek a separate identity away from the Parsi roots which she cannot escape. A self-proclaimed rebel in life, she
has been directly or indirectly in conflict with her conservative Parsi background. Meher Pestonji has written three novels *Mixed Marriage* and Other *Parsi Stories*, *Parvez* and *Sadak Chhap*. She has also written two plays, *A Piano for Sale* and *Feeding Crows*. In *Feeding Crows* Arif Zakaria acted as one of the stage actors for the play.

Pestonji deals with issues like quest for identity, cultural ethos, feminism, communal riots, dislocation of culture, multi-culturalism, hybridity, global or mixed culture. The writer takes up all the above issues and goes on elaborately discussing them in her novels. But the issue pertaining to identity is all the more pertinent to any discussion of the Parsi writing. The Parsis in India are descendants of a group of the Persian refugees who migrated to India in 7th century AD after the conquest of Persia by the Arabs. The wrench of having lost their original home continues to haunt many Parsi writers like Rohinton Mistry, Behram Malabari, Cornelia Sarobji and others. Meher Pestonji, on the contrary, makes a conscious assertion of her identity and mirrors the psyche of her marginalised community along with their problems and plights.

Her first collection of stories *Mixed Marriage and Other Parsi Stories* are based on her personal experiences. These stories reflect a moving away from the conservative ethos of Parsi upbringing to the new experiences of a world opened by journalism, feminism and the values, which she upheld for social justice and equality.

*Pervez* traces the intellectual maturation of a young Parsi girl against the backdrop of 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 Gujarat riots broke out. Pestonji 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 tension prevailing at that time, Pestonji guessed the publishers didn’t want to take the risk of publishing the book creating a storm. Pervez is a Parsi girl and she describes the riots of 1993 from neutral point of view. The novel has autobiographical elements. She was involved in the left movement during the build-up to the demolition of Babri Masjid and she personally witnessed riots. She fictionalize her experiences in 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, which Pestonji wrote as a journalist. But it has no elements of autobiography. *Sadak Chhaap* is a story of ten year old Rahul part-time rag picker, pick pocket and petty heir, living foot loose on the streets of Bombay. The day he finds an abandoned baby on a railway platform, his life changes forever. He quickly appoints himself the baby’s father making her the emotional anchor that had been missing from his life. While he is treated as quite as a hero within his street community, he wins the trust and affection of his people who are willing to give him the opportunity to start afresh and work towards better future.

But the streets are mean, inescapable as Rahul indulges in his paltry desires and shallow dreams he finds himself spirathing, into a vortex of crime, abuse and loneliness. The novel evokes the brutal existence of street children with unrelenting realism and deep sympathy. *Sadak Chhaap* grew out of her journalistic writings on street children from the mid 80s. Pestonji had been writing about street kids their needs, maltreatment of kids, N.G.O. Projects, films for and about kids. Very little, of the book is pure fiction, other than the central idea of finding an abandoned baby on a railway platform. Rahul, the
protagonist, is the amalgamation of several kids the author has met. The experiences of the children in the streets have been incorporated into the narrative. Pestonji said that 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 the kids from foreign paedophiles. With Sadak Chhapp Pestonji wants to highlight Bombay’s underbelly that urban planners want to wish away without any doing anything to confront the harshness of its reality.

Pestonji’s first play Piano for Sale features two women with a common past. They have been in love with the same man. In the play the personal is overshadowed by feminist thought, there is attachment between the two women despite the pain each had inflicted on the other. Pestonji’s second play Feeding Crows tackles urban issues, in the beginning humorously, then moves into deeper areas of the psyche and the clash between current imperatives and traditional norms. It is not autobiographical but it does express her contemporary concerns, the Zorastrian religion which dates back to the period before Christ. Some of the practices initiated by prophet Zorashustra were valid for his time in history but are completely invalid in contemporary urban situation. She referred to Dokhmenishin the system of disposing of dead bodies. Traditionally Parsis were mandated to dispose off their dead body leaving the mountain top 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.

It is feasible to keep such a practice alive in cotemporary urban areas where it is virtually impossible to sustain a vulture population.
Currently the traditionalists and rationalists of the community are debating the issues strongly. The dokhmenshin system survives only in Bombay, Karachi and perhaps a few cities with sizable Parsi population. Parsis who die abroad or in places where there are no dogmas, are either buried or cremated. *Feeding Crows* by Meher Pestonji takes on the debate regardless of offending sections of her own community.

It is with this consciousness that Pestonji creates her characters in the fictional world. Pestonji in these stories deals with issues of Parsis, the way of living their peculiar life style, their mannerism, ideas, and attitudes and their interpersonal social relationship. Moreover, she criticizes her own community for one reason or the other. It is her love for humanity which makes her cross the boundaries and express her feelings for right to life. Her art has a wider canvas and accommodates issues far beyond the immediate communal predicament. As a writer, she is continually engaged in a quest of order, and authenticity that would make human life worth living beyond the boundaries of caste, community, state, and country. She is always busy in bridging up the gap between the communities and countries. Recently she visited Germany. In an interview when she was asked about her trip to Germany, she answered:

*I was invited because my story Outsider from the collection: Mixed Marriage had been selected as text for German students. I have talked to the students as well as to the teachers who will be interpreting the text for them. Intellectually it was enriching to talk to people who were cued in to so many aspects of Indian life. I was asked questions not only about my story but about the caste system, the position of women, Bollywood, urban slums, the condition of Muslims in India. There is genuine interest in preparing German students to deal with the India of tomorrow, which seem as an emerging power...*
She occupies a prominent place amongst the contemporary Indian Parsi writers in English. She has a complex perception that attributes to her fictional and non-fictional writings that determine the distinguishing feelings of her intellect and fictional world that is created by her. She says that nothing is sacrosanct one should think and question everything. The image that the Parsis hold as honest and kind hearted is changed with Pestonji’s ideas and attitudes in which she determines the Parsi community. The story of *Mixed Marriage* begins with Sneha’s ‘navjote’ (Naming ceremony). Sneha is the daughter of Cyrus a Parsi and Savita a Hindu who have had an inter-caste marriage. They had decided to name their daughter ‘Snehlata.’ A large number of guests were invited for the auspicious ceremony and Makku Masi left no opportunity to taunt the ‘Hindus’ to torture Savita.

Makku Masi was against inviting too many Hindus, ‘because the whole family visits and gifts only Rs.10/- when the caterer charges Rs. 250 per head. This had provoked Savita to retort ‘you Parsis are calculating about every paisa, aren’t you?’ Savita’s suffering was the result of mixed marriage. Savita’s parents were not too glad of their daughter’s choice of Cyrus. But all the same, they had attended their wedding to bless the couple:

*Like Cyrus, she was lawyer, specializing in women’s issues-divorce, maintenances, dowry harassment, family violence- while he focused on human rights. They had met at Gitanagar, a sprawling slum, during a screening of Anand Patwardhan Bombay our city, a film making slum dwellers aware of their right to housing and provoking them to oppose the municipality’s demolition squads that had been moving down their pathetic huts in the preceding months.*

After marriage at her husband’s house, she finds a few strange things, such as the lady of the house did not cook food. In fact the
whole house survived on food brought by dabbawalas from the mess. Savita’s mother-in-law said that it all starts with love and ends with slavery, she considered cooking food for husband was slavery where as for Savita it was pleasure. Savita was strictly a vegetarian being a Hindu whereas her in-laws were non-vegetarians.

Whenever Savita missed her parents and felt out of place, she would study one of her cases. Savita had to make cultural adjustments. She was able to fit in very well in her husband’s close-nit family tolerant of each other’s eccentricity. She is allowed to tend her Tulsi plant caring for it so tenderly that every one knew it held a special significance for her. There would have been serious cultural clashes if she were not to do that duty. But whenever Savita was away her mother-in-law used to water the plants. There is mutual understanding between Savita and her mother-in-law. She always supported her though she had disapproving relatives. ‘But Marriage is marriage.’ ‘A bad marriage can be ended but, blood relatives are inescapable,’ said Savita regretting her words almost as soon as they escaped her lips.

Savita had entered the Katagra family knowing major cultural adjustments would have to be made, especially when it came to non-vegetarian food.

It was in its early stage a case of wife battering by a drunk husband but had developed many twists and turns later on. After suffering violence for years, the client Gitanjali had started an affair with a neighbour. They had a daughter called Clara who was sent back to her step-father. The secret was out when the lover, Siddharth died of AIDS and left his property to Clara, his illegitimate daughter. Now the real husband was demanding a divorce. Gitanjali had approached Savita to handle her case and she wanted the custody of the daughter. Savita
advised Gitanjali to go to HIV quarters to get herself tested for AIDS. She got HIV positive.

For some days Savita didn’t hear from Gitanjali but one day she received a phone call from Gitanjali who conveyed that she had separated from her drunkard husband. She attributed her suffering to the Mixed Marriage. An intercaste marriage against the wishes and blessings of their parents. She suffered for her own fault. Her parents approved their marriage without hesitation. At last, she had made peace with her parents and told them her sad story.

They were very eager to be the guardians-cum-grand parents of their grand child and even started calling Clara as ‘Nina.’ They (Gitanjali’s parents) promised to take care of Clara after Gitanjali. The story of Mixed Marriage is very touching, where a Hindu girl marries a Parsi boy, which is successful, with all the cultural adjustments. Whereas another marriage where a Hindu girl marries a Christian boy ends in disaster.

The story of Mixed Marriage is in fact, not so much about people but about social and moral issues. The story also highlights affection, understanding and considerations between the adults and the youngsters. The story reaches its climax where it is replete with human warmth and fellow feeling in the hostile world.

These ‘in-between’ spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood- singular or communal - that initiate new sign of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself.⁹

Savita is able to resist against the dominant culture and tries to occupy central position making her own choice as she becomes lawyer and get married to Cyrus a Parsi boy. She also makes cultural
adjustment with the Parsi family, where she makes her own choice and is able to occupy the central position. The other couple Gitanjali and her husband Pinto (a Christian), who belong to different culture and religion again where they get married to each other by their choice but unfortunately their marriage fails. Meher Pestonji thus highlights the success and the failure of mixed marriages by creating fictional characters. And these characters can be divided into active and passive registers. Savita is able to resist and hence becomes the active register where as Gitanjali fails and is unable to resist against the dominant power.

This newly attained identity fosters the idea of a homogeneous culture and society and helps in building global citizens as Meher Pestonji herself says in an interview:

*Absolutely. My own daughter is married to a Muslim. Mixed marriages are invariably the result of love, of choice, which is a comfortable base for children 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 is grown up with a wider perspective, tolerance for differences, openness to absorb a variety of experience 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!*  

Pestonji, thus, seems to be advocating mixed marriages which would produce tolerant, open minded, mature men with wider perspective.

The theme of the story is the atrocities faced by street children. The woes of the kids, the torture, the misery that an unfortunate child goes through is narrated by the narrator. A bitter truth of poverty is highlighted.
Cawas and Zenia were a young couple from the privileged strata of the society and since Theresa was in India to study the underprivileged, contrasts were bound to surface. She was staying as a paying guest at their place and found them very decent. The story begins with Theresa, a sociology student from Germany who was documenting the lives of street children in Bombay. While her research associates did the same with street children in Rio de Janeiro, Johannesburg, and Kuala Lumpur after which they planned a comprehensive analysis:

She shouldn’t have lost her temper so impetuously, she told herself. Cawas and Zenia had been decent with her. They were a young couple from the privileged strata of society and since she was in India to study the underprivileged, contrasts were bound to surface.11

During her research work while Theresa was exploring the slums and shelter of runaway kids, she came across a boy of twelve years old, called ‘Santosh.’ She found him interesting to communicate with as he knew English and spoke English. Santosh had runaway from home when he could no longer tolerate his father beating and assaulting his mother. He had been to Almora Christian school until seventh grade, as his father was a government schoolteacher. He didn’t want to go home as he didn’t want to burden his mother to feed him and hence wanted to earn a living for himself and later on had plans to call his mother and sister to Bombay.

Jyoti, her guide took her to railway stations where runaway kids arrive in Bombay, to the beaches and bazaars, where they sometimes find employment. She also took her to the free food distribution centers attached to places of worships, to the rubbish
bins that hold treasures like through way combs for ragpickers, to street corners called ‘addas’ where kids as young as ten got high on pot, drinks, drugs…” Foreigners are over-sensitive to poverty. ‘Yet they’d learnt to survive in a big fish-eat-little-fish environment while they were the smallest fish of all.’ The class system not only destroys the understanding between the communities but also creates differences between these classes. The dominant class always plays an important role to destruct the common people. Pestonji rightly points out the way in which the higher class people the so-called higher strata of the society destruct the working class, and because of the class structure children are put to the problems which they have to face. The music which is faced by the minorites is a development of the class system which is highlighted by Pestonji calling the High class as Big fish.

Other texts attempt to reach into the culture of subalterns in order to fashion an image of the dominant bloc as speaking in the name of, are making common cause with those it rules. Still other fashions their resistance at a textual level, offering symbolic resolutions to problems that are intractable in everyday life.  

Pestonji raises her voice against the centre and gives a voice to the peripheral children, the marginalized people and highlights their problems.

The storywriter has made it a point to expose hypocrisies of some self-centered Parsis. Parsis are considered to be slightly dotty. Pestonji has also highlighted her character’s weakness for food, their insensitivity, squeamishness and callousness. The storywriter has been about to find suffice elbowroom for occasional comments on burning issues of our time. These people failed to explain their culture to the
foreigners. Their lives seemed centered around acquiring imported cosmetics, French perfumes and Swiss chocolates and cheese.\textsuperscript{15}

In an interview when Pestonji was asked about Parsis’ as minority she said, ‘Purely numbers, Parsis are an endangered race. There are less than a hundred thousand Parsis in the world. Hope that the 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 privileged linerily. They are a privileged minority. They are privileged economically, educationally, and socially. I have never come across a Parsi street kid, or a Parsi family living in slum. Philanthropists of the community take great pride in looking after weaker sections. In street because I think it is unethical for the community to demand concessions for jobs or in educational institutions when they have all the means to qualify and compete as equals.’\textsuperscript{16}

\textit{We are an endangered species, with barely a hundred thousand Parsis left in the world… while Indian breed more and more, Parsis breed less and less.}\textsuperscript{17}

The problem with the Parsi is two fold: firstly they are privileged minority and secondly they are the endangered race. Because they don't want to live their life independently and they don’t want to get married and produce children. They have to face the problem of being minority in the world.

The storyteller criticizes the Parsis for their false sense of respectability. But when it comes to the Tatas the storyteller highlights their great contribution without Black Money to the Indian Education and India’s economic development. Ratan Tata designed the world’s smallest car to contribute to the growth and development of India’s economy and India as tomorrow’s super power.
The Tatas’ are the most respected business house of the country,’ he replied. They started the first steel plant in India, the first hydro-electric works, the first engineering works. All before independence. Planning for the future of the country. And now Ratan Tata has designed India’s first indigenous car. From their profits they built the best cancer hospital in the country founded an institute for social sciences, another for research in the fundamental sciences. Imagine doing all this with out black money in country like India. 18

Savak was friend to Zenia and Cawas. Theresa was a paying guest at this Parsi couple’s house. Cawas and Zenia were a Parsi couple, who belonged to the elite section of society. Savak, who originally was burly six-footer with shaggy eyebrows who paired up with Theresa for that weekend and carried Theresa’s baseball. While on picnic with the Shroffs after lunch what ever was left once Theresa thought of giving it to the begging kids. But a fat woman who was Parsi thought them to be dirty and full of lice and never had a bath. Parsis are inhuman and dislike the poor and the downtrodden. Theresa got angry and resisted against the fat woman who instead of giving the left over food to the street children, started feeding a scrawny dog while a boy and a girl with bamboo stick legs and sun bleached hair watched enviously. Theresa always sympathized with Santosh, who had helped her with the details required for her research work. Santosh was from conservative north. He had recently arrived from Almora at the foothills of the Himalayas. The special attention that Theresa showered on Santosh made other boys especially Raju, Mohan, Shafique jealous, and they beat and abused Santosh after Theresa left. When it was time for Theresa to leave for Germany she was being given party. On her way to the party she wants to speak to Santosh despite her friends appeal as not to talk of Santosh. Theresa speaks to find out from him why he was terrified as she did not get the answer and she could not
guess the reason of his fear. She spoke to him about his fear. Santosh tells that his friends constantly trouble him. But when he names other boys who constantly troubled him it strikes to her that it may be due to sexual abuse as he appears as if he is raped.

‘You report, didi. I go. I report….they kill me.’
‘You have to report this, Santosh. Those boys will rape others.’
‘You report … I go… I go to Station now……’
You tell Jyoti madam, didi…I go…I go…Salam. Good bye, bye-bye.’

Disgusted at the incident Theresa tries to calm Santosh and tells him to make a report of the crime committed against him. But he is too terrified and says he was leaving the filthy place and he had had enough of it. The contrast between the high flying lifestyle of Cawas friends and the street kids among whom Theresa spent her days deepened her understanding of India, though she realized there was more to the country than monuments, slums and an urban elite. The common thread running through her experiences was unpunctuality and with the precision bred in her German character disturbed her more than poverty or dirt.

Through this story Pestonji focuses on the marginalized section of society which comprises also of street kids and the other section of society which represents power and enjoy all rights. Whereas the other sections suffer poverty, alienation pains and sufferings and are deprived of all their rights and again they are unable to resists against these dominant groups/ sections which hold power.

Pestonji’s story which is prescribed for the German students focuses on the realities faced by the street children. They are sexually exploited and badly treated. They had no rights and bear injustice done to them by dominant bloc, due to class structure. The poor people are
marginalized, and few people enjoy the center position. To get rid of poverty is the issues pertaining to the street kids, there should be equal distribution of wealth among the Indians. They need food clothes, shelter, and education from the government. Which to some extend the deserving children get the facilities from the N.G.O’s and government institutions. Whereas majority of them are marginalized.

When Pestonji was asked, “what compelled you to criticize the Parsi community?” and the answer she gave serves the purpose for the short story in the collection of other Parsi Stories called ‘Riot’. She said:

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 e-examine our roots, our cultures to weed out ideas and practices that are not consonant with rational, liberal, scientific thought which is the hallmark of contemporary life. My conflict with Parsis came shortly after my divorce and entering journalism which in those days, was a poorly paying profession. These conflicts came to a head during the post Babri Masjid Riots of 1992-93. A young Muslim boy, who does excellent work with street kids, was stranded with his family in a housing colony dominated by the Shiv Shainiks. The local corporate 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 activists finds had cars in which some one 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. Parsis being nor Hindu nor Muslim might be able to get away with driving into an area that would be risky for the warring communities. 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.  

The story Riot begins with violence, pain suffering and agony of a majority of minority Muslims. The opening of the story is with a dialogue between Rashna and Dinyar. It begins when the communal Hindu-Muslim riots were going on due to the demolition of Babri
Masjid. The whole scenario was just horrifying. People had become mad. With revenge in their minds they were beyond Hitler in cruelty. With this background Rashna, a Parsi girl, is desperately trying to contact her friends to help her best friend Tahira who was stranded along with her old mother in a riot-hit area. No one could dare to go there to help her.

Meher criticizes the Parsi community for being xenophobic and also for their false sense of respectability. Rashna is the mouthpiece of Pestonji and there are autobiographical elements in the story. Pestonji had personal and first hand experience of the riots which broke out during 1993 Babri Masjid. The social and political conditions during the riots, the realties of riots are heart rending which are described and narrated by Pestonji.

Rashna first tried to contact her Parsi friends hoping that their neutrality and the respect could be advantageous in the current crisis. But all her efforts were in vain as she was getting absolutely no response from those whom she had expected as the best friends to help her.

‘Are you saying Muslims are good and Hindus are evil?’
‘No! I’m saying rioters are evil and doing good involves coming to the aid of victims.’

The issue pertaining to identity is all the pertinent to any discussion of the Parsi writings. The Parsis in India are descendants of a group of refugees who immigrated to India in the 7th century AD. After the conquest of Persia by the Arabs. The wrench of having lost their original home continues to haunt many Parsis. More than once the Parsi characters in Pestonji’s stories remember Persia with nostalgia. They have lived in India more than thirteen hundred years but still they
dream of Persia. When Pestonji was asked whether the traditional Parsis have accepted her ideas, she said:

All over the world and all through history liberals and traditionalists argue, argue, and 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.  

Rashna was a brave girl and didn’t lose hope or courage. She kept on calling one friend after another to see who could come to the rescue of her best friend who had the guts to barge in a riot stricken area to pull Tahira and her mother from the clutches of Sena Activists who spread terror in the whole area. Any one volunteering to go there meant that it was to risk one’s own life! She was shocked and ashamed of her community people who showed no concern for the Muslims and were unmoved by the gruesome incidents. They bothered about themselves. They were very self-centered people. Rashna asked help to rescue her friend but they had an excuse ready to dodge the work:

‘Good you’ve come, Rashna didi. Where is Tahira- didi?’
‘Her family had to move into a relief camp.’
‘Thousands have left Dharavi. Some area in relief camps, some of have gone to relatives, some have gone back to their village. We have been working day and night.’

Rashna and Tahira ran a joint organization called Mahila Ekata Sanghtan. The Organization worked for the welfare of downtrodden and helpless women. They took up cases of dowry, rape, wife beating and wanted to get justice and timely help for suffering women. Rashna was very helpless trying to get help for her friend Tahira. She made one last desperate effort and dialed Rahul’s number. At last, her prayers were answered.

It is in the hands of a few who have the key powers, whether to keep the marginalized people happy or to put them to pain and sufferings in the name of communal riots. The power holders for the
sake of power may take any step to protect their own interest. It is with this idea and her first hand experience that Pestonji projects the realities of communal riots and the differences that is been there between the centre which represents power and periphery which represents the common, marginalized subaltern people during communal riots. These people are mercilessly put to death.

Rahul is immediately willingly to offer help to Tahira and assured Rashna that he would himself see to the safety of her Muslim friend and her old mother. Within no time Rahul reached where Tahira was stranded and took her and her mother in his white Maruti with a’ Press Stickers’. So it was absolutely safe to take them with him. He took them to the relief camp. As soon as they reached there, Tahira made her mother comfortable with the older women and started helping the riot victims. ‘A brave humane act from the ranks of the bigots had answered her search for a ray of light for the first time since the riots began her spirit soared.’

The victims were badly injured and needed medical assistance. Meanwhile Rashna also wanted to help her organization to deal with the victims. She had to cross ‘Shiv Sena’ areas where activists were ready to attack any Muslim. She started to see Shiv Sainiks approaching her and introduced that she was a Parsi. So they told her that she would put on a ‘tika’ on her forehead as they didn’t fear the Parsi for any trouble. She was allowed to go ahead but when one of the activists told them about her organization, being with a Muslim they were suspicious and continued their cross-questioning. When she explained that, she helped women in general and not only Muslim women. She was allowed to go. Her heart was heavy as if some thing had happened to her. Her parents would blame her only as they didn’t
like the work that she did. They wanted her to work with respectable organizations and work for blind, deaf and dumb but she opted to help people in the slums. But during riots when she and her friend Tahira helped people she felt that her decision was right. She had saved her best friend’s life that was a great achievement of her life. The story ends peacefully and shows the Hindu-Muslim unity. Rahul a Hindu saves Tahira a Muslim by risking his own life. It also shows the unique part of the story lies in the fact that this help is given amidst Hindu-Muslim communal riots.

Pestonji was invited at Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Marathwada University for the *The Late Sardar Dalip Singh Memorial Lecture Series*. In her talk she mentioned the story *Riot*. The experiences she had, could be clearly seen in the character of Rashna. Pestonji has a Muslim friend. Her name in the story is Tahira. And the social activist who rescued Pestonji’s friend can be seen in the characters of Rahul and Dinyar, these characters represent the typical Parsi group; Pestonji concerns for humanity, her self defense attitude is focused through this story and her love for Muslim friend can be seen through this story which has autobiographical elements.

The fourth story in the collection of short stories of other Parsi stories is *Transience*, which begins with Najimai an old Parsi widow who lives with her servant alone. She is seen making a crochet lace on a saree. She is skilled in handwork. But her husband Behramji who is rich enough didn’t allow his wife to sell the handwork. Najimai was ‘the seventy-four year old lady working on the magnum opus of her life,’\(^{25}\) who lived with her husband Behramji and servant Rosie. He allowed her to knit or stitch clothes for her near and dear ones as a token of remembrance.
Rosemary did all the household work, though she was old but had become irritable with age. She was honest but only felt it was her right to cheat Najimai of some amount while buying grocery items. She had become rude and argumentative. But there was no way out for Najimai as she slipped in the bathroom and had injured the hipbone. She had to undergo two surgeries, hence had become inactive and depended on a servant. Chalo bai. “Coffee-toast is on the table. Shall I get your egg?” asked the small built Rose who, though older than Najimai, was far more active.  

Rosemary served them with breakfast, lunch and dinner, gave Najimai a bath and bought vegetables etc. from the market and cheated Najimai sometimes in big items while giving the account of the expenditure. Najimai’s grand daughter Armaity was her favorite grandchild caught Rosie six times even then she did not scold her. But she had served them for 35 years she warned her not to do so. But Rosie started getting hysterical. Armaity was a very bold girl. She was left in Najimai’s care when her parents got a prestigious job in a Multinational company in USA. Najimai was closely attached to her grand daughter and she too reciprocated in the same way. Najimai feels relieved when Armaity disclosed the fact that she has fallen in love with a Parsi bawa’ who is by profession a doctor named Xerxes.

The high point of her day was Armaity coming over, prattling about college. Her friends had strange names. Yashodhara, Mridula, Bishakha, even the boys were Khalid, Yeshwant and Pronob. ‘Don’t you have any Parsi friends?’ She asked concerned about the young girl’s marriage prospects...” Parsis are boring?

Armaity had always disliked Parsi boys saying they didn’t have appealing looks. Najimai felt happy for her to have chosen a Parsi life partner. ‘Be friendly with every one but when it comes to marriage
remember to choose your own kind. We must keep our race pure’. ‘What’s pure about Parsis? We eat, drink, make money, lie and cheat like anyone else.’

The rebellious daughter who is the representative of the Parsis of the younger generation finds the young men of her own community boring. As far as the purity of the Parsis is concerned she adds:

“what’s pure about Parsis? When her grandmother talks about the Parsis.”

Racial superiority’ she advises her grandmother not to sound like a Nazi or Afrikanner’ because this is the age of democracy and the racial superiority is humbug went bust long ago. Bawas’ she adds, are ‘all doodha paus.’ All flab, no muscle no sex appeals. Najimai was stitching lace on the saree to be given as a surprise gift to Armaity her only favorite grand child on her wedding. She had lots of dreams attached to the saree to see her grand daughter wear it on her wedding day. But what all is proposed by man is some times it is disposed by the almighty. And no one knows what is stored in fates.

‘But she can’t wear it to marry someone else. That would bring bad luck.’ ‘Never mid wedding. She will still have saree from your own hand, no? After one two years it will be saree you made for her.’

Suddenly one day Minoo crashes the bad news that Armaity’s fiancé met with a terrible accident and died on the spot while he was in hurry to go and see a patient who had a cardiac arrest.

The post colonial women writer like Meher Pestonji in the present story criticizes the false sense of respectability of the Parsis. The story takes a very different turn due to the sad event. The sentiments associated with the making of Armaity’ saree are hurt and Najimai orders Rosie to keep the saree locked in her cupboard until her
death. She tells that her grand daughter may wear it by remembering her grand mother’s love. Both the cultures of Parsis and the Indians are the colonized cultures. The writer highlights the weakness of her community and with different angels. The story ends with the tragic incident of the death of Xerxes.

In transience Meher Pestonji highlights the racial superiority which the people of her community go on boasting. And as she mentions that there is nothing pure about the Parsi community. These people they also eat, drink, make money lie and cheat like anyone else. The first generation people are Najamai and Behramji whereas Armaity and Xerxes represent the second generation and they believed in democracy and equality. The writer remarkably fulfils the role of a writer, as preserver of collective tradition. She is a historian and mythmaker, she highlights the negative and positive aspects of her own community. The fifth story in the collection of short stories in the *Mixed Marriage* deals with the protagonist’s dilemma. The story *Dilemma* reveals the ambivalent attitude of art collector who couldn't get courage to show solidarity with a Hindu street theater group who were protesting against MF Hussain’s obscene paintings.

Hoshang, the protagonist of the story, a middle aged Parsi who lived with Pralhad, his housekeeper is fond of art and has a few collections with him. He is a lover of fine paintings. He is quite annoyed when he reads the news about M.F. Hussain’s paintings of a nude goddess Saraswati written on it, which had offended the sentiments of Hindus. They were making a lot of hue and cry about it.

*He scanned the report describing a bunch of hooligans running riot at the Gufa, M.F. Hussain’s architectural construct at Ahmedabad, burning and damaging paintings and tapestries worth lakhs. They claimed to be offended by his painting of Sarawati.*

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*Meher Pestonji: Colonial Ethos*
So many of the art lovers had decided to protest against the laws of the government and demanding M.F. Hussain’s freedom from any offence or guilt for having made the painting. The writer has beautifully, keenly and elaborately painted the negative traits of the Parsis in each story. In this story she shows how coward Parsis are. If they feel injustice is being done, they won’t have the courage to protest openly. Hoshang was an art collector and had picked up a few nude paintings. He found nothing obscene in them but he certainly didn’t want to get into a controversy over a painting. He stayed in an apartment where there were many flats. Other flat owner had trouble with him, when the water fell from the balcony. Hoshang also complained of their hanging clothes in the balcony as it looked like a chawl.

Another neighbour Amol Choksey had invited him to his place for a game of scrabble. Amol’s son (20 years old) wanted to talk to Hoshang about the attack on M.F. Hussain: ‘Destruction is wrong. Especially of art, which is spirituality elevating. It should not have been allowed.’ Before starting the game, Hoshang started complaining about the Bhonsales, who complained about the water which fell from his balcony. He too had complained against them that they put their garbage on the staircase every night. Slowly they switched on to the hot topic of M.F. Hussain’s painting. The painting was twenty years old and no one had taken notice of it. ‘Then where’s the Saraswati? Who knows? It’s twenty years old painting: ‘Twenty years old..! must be in some collection…the poor collector.’ Hindutva-vadis’ did not want to attack India’s most celebrated painter being a Muslim but their sentiments were offended. Pestonji rightly remarks for twenty years no
one was offended by the painting and suddenly now they became aware of the old painting after M.F. Hussain painted it again:

*I think Husain should not have painted nude goddess... if you ask for trouble you get it... ‘our culture has always celebrated the human body. Haven’t you been to Khajuraho?*  

Hoshang wanted to protest but didn’t have the courage. Amol, Sunita, Sunil all were going to protest. Then a novel idea struck him. May be he could be at the demo without being there. He left the showroom early that evening. He reached there and was cruising around the art gallery where twenty to thirty people had gathered on the pavement. For an hour those protestors made speeches and shouted slogan. Hoshang kept cruising around them, when they began to disperse, he went away, feeling exhilarated. He had participated in the demo in his own way.

When Sunita and Sunil confronted him, he tried to avoid answering their queries regarding his whereabout. He made them feel that he had also participated in the demo and was busy searching them in the crowd. At the end of the story, Pestonji criticizes the Parsis, that they are strange people living in India. Though they know what is good and what is bad but still they live in a dilemma.

*What strange people Parsis are! Ninety percent of them cackle like old McDonald’s farm but only among them will you find one sedate gentlemen devising unique gestures of solidarity.*

The story writer has made it a point to expose hypocrisies of some self-centered Parsis.

*‘Zarathustra,’ as the prophet of a new experience of being is not arbitrary. For it was the Persian prophet, Zoroaster according to Nietzsche, who first identified the moral
The Parsis believed in Zarathustra. And the teaching of Zarathustra shows good thoughts, good deeds and good action. But the Parsis are self-centered people, they do not socialize. They still have the phobia of being outsider; they don't belong to India and have their roots in Persia. Pestonji takes a neutral position when she raises her voice against the evils done by different communities. Whether Hindu or Muslim. She targets her own community for not joining hands for the right cause for justice, peace and harmony of the country. Pestonji highlights the problems of Muslims being suppressed and oppressed in their own country after gaining political independence. All the communities living in India should equally share freedom, and the Muslims should not be targeted in the name of Hindutva-and by the Hindutva-vadis. Pestonji uses the elements of wit, humour and suspense in the story.

The sixth story in the collection of short stories of *Mixed Marriage and Other Parsi Stories* is named as *Class*. The story is about a woman called Bhikubai who is very poor and lives in a slum. She does household work and earns a living in a Parsi lady’s house, who is a private teacher. Everyone calls her ‘Katy aunty.’ She takes private tuitions of English medium school children. She has eight girls and six boys in different batches. Every year on her daughter’s birthday, she selects one student from Gujarati, Hindi or Marathi background for free coaching. This year she planned to teach Bhikubai’s daughter Sandhya.

*This is where I will be teaching you. There are eight girls and six boys in my class… All are from English Medium Schools. You are in Marathi medium, no? Never mind. I can teach you English. Other subjects also, what class are you in?*
The student Sandhya was from a Marathi Medium School. If the student was sincere, regular and punctual, she would continue to give free tuition otherwise not. Her last student was Asha who received tuition free of cost for three years. Sandhya was a daydreamer. She couldn’t concentrate on her studies and somehow she found her drawing pictures at the end of the lecture and the pictures could be anything enough to embarrass her.

‘You are ruining your books,’ scolded Katy Aunty. ‘If you weren’t Bhiku’s daughter I’d make you buy new books. From now on I don’t want any drawing, understand?’

Everybody in the class kept a distance from Sandhya as they knew she was the daughter of a maid servant and they were from rich families. But sometimes Jasmine and Meheranghis would ask for her help-for their Marathi homework. When they had to write a Marathi essay on a subject like national integration.

Hindus and Muslims must live like brothers and sisters,’ Sandhya would parrot a chart on the wall of her classroom. ‘Why only Hindus and Muslims. Don’t Parsis and Christians also matter?’ Meheranghis was younger than Sandhya but full of questions.

Sometimes they referred to Sandhya as a ‘ghaati’ or a ‘ganga ni choonri.’ She had got used to the phrases Darius hurled at her. She was quite comfortable with Jasmine with whom she could speak a mixture of Hindi, Marathi, and English. Jasmine would defend Sandhya that at least she didn’t live on charity like Darius, the underprivileged girl told, “For Parsi’s charity is a way of life.” To which she retorts, ‘If Parsis want to do real charity they should build houses for really poor people like….people who live in huts along the road side. But the harsh fact of life is that ‘Parsi’s charity is for Parsis.'
Jasmine defended further saying that Sandhya doesn’t live on charity like him, who lived in a complex owned by extremely rich Parsis who rented out the house on a very low rent to poor Parsis. It is just to help their community people to lead a better life. ‘Yes. We are not rich like other Parsis. You should see the way they live on Peddar Road, Napean Sea Road.... We live very simply compared to them.’

Sandhya had decided to be nurse and hence concentrated on her biology classes. Katy aunty assumed that she would be another Ash if she kept her hard work and concentration. Then Katy Aunty’s sharp voice rang out. ‘Sandhya! Darius! Come here at once!’ Darius asked Sandhya whether she would like to learn to draw ‘male sex organs’ and make some gestures. Jasmine saw it and warned him of dire consequences if he repeated being vulgar again. Darius was quite bold and didn’t take the warning seriously. His age and emotions compelled him to go ahead with a new vulgar mischief. This time he drew a winking eye at the tip of the phallus suggesting lewd invitation.

_But what would a phallus see when it comes to its prime and entered a woman, she wondered. Secretions, uterus and ovaries, if an eye was penetrating enough. Could it go beyond physicalities to look into the heart of a woman?_

Sandhya made a blunder by passing the note to Jasmine who reported it to Katy aunty. Since it is a male dominated society nobody blames a male. Beavouir reteirates this view:

_For Beavour, society is organized in such a way as to favour male projects and aspirations. The obvious question which arises is: How did such a system come into being?...These conceptual, social and political systems then developed to favour male interests rather than society's interests as a whole. Women have been obliged to adapt to this patriarchal system, which maintains them in a subordinate position._
Women have been always oppressed by the male dominated society. Pestonji tries to highlight the sufferings of the oppressed section of the society, which is, represented by Sandhya, whereas Darius represents the privileged section of the society. Katy aunty asked Sandhya whether she came to the class to study or to tease the boys. Though she tried to defend herself, her pleas fell on deaf ears. Katy aunty said that Darius had been her student for two years and had never teased the girls. It was only after she came that such a shameful and embarrassing incident had occurred in the class. She left her that day with a warning that if she did anything like it again she would be thrown out of the class.

Sandhya knew that if she were a Parsi girl, the story would have been different. But her outrage subsided and she began to feel amused at the memory of his sketch. She started imagining things related to the sketch and somehow once again she did what she shouldn’t have done. Again she started drawing dirty pictures. Jasmine saw it and reported it to Katy aunty who was furious and immediately threw Sandhya out of her class.

‘Katy Aunty! Sandhya is drawing dirty pictures!’ With a start, Sandhya realized that her doodle resembled a phallus with eyes embedded in testicles. And she was promptly thrown out of Katy Aunty’s class.

Thus proving that people living in slum deserve what they get and aren’t worth anything. They are dirty minded and don’t make use of an opportunity provided to them, to improve. In this story, Meher Pestonji once again focuses on the negative trait of the Parsis, their attitude towards life, their biased and partial views and actions.

Class is the story which depicts the higher and lower class of the society. Sandhya is a peripherical character where she is unable to
resists against the class system and gender. Katy Aunty and Darius represent the higher starta of society and SAndhya represents the marginalized section. When Darius commits mistake he is not punished but SAndhya. She is also thrown out of the tuition class by Katy Aunty. Pestonji depicts the way in which the higher sections of society exploits the peripherical.

The Verdict is the seventh story in the Mixed Marriage and Other Parsi Stories. The story is about a Parsi couple who were married happily and unfortunately got an abnormal daughter. The father is shocked terribly because he is hoping for a son; that too he dreams of his son attaining fame and prosperity in life. But as ill luck would have it, his dream in his life is broken into pieces and is beyond words as an abnormal daughter born to him. The father is shown to have absolutely no feelings for his abnormal daughter and wants to get rid of her. Everything was fine in their life until something dreadful happened. Perin instead of giving birth to a male normal child had delivered an abnormal girl child. ‘The sight of his one-year-old daughter’s deformed body sickened Gustad. Her mouth drooled, her eyes were out of sync and her left side was almost paralyzed. Her brain was damaged at birth.’ This had been the medical verdict and Gustad had to live with it. It was Gustad who had to accept the bitter truth of life and learnt to live with it and find pleasure in taking care of the helpless girl. But he didn't do that. His wife Perin and mother both were devoted to Tina the abnormal child. The mother nursed the child, cleaned her and fed the hideous hole in her face. Gustad resented the affection, she showered on the child. Ever since Tina was born he paid less attention to Perin and Tina and gave dirty looks to Tina. Sometimes his mother saw him and said she was ashamed of him whereby he felt that she should be
ashamed of Tina who was a misfit in their elegant apartment. His first
disappointment in life was when he got a baby girl who was mentally
retarded. ‘Gustad would envied their sturdy bodies, their robust health.
If we lived in that slum we could have abandoned her at some railway
station and no one would have cared, he mused, still smelling last
night’s liquor on his breath.’ \(^{48}\)

Gustad would admire the children playing at slums. The baby
wouldn’t stop wailing at night. Sleepless nights had left Gustad a
wreak. Gustad would remember those days when he and his wife Perin
loved each other.

He remembered every detail of their lovemaking right
there in the drawing room with all the doors open.
Neither cared if there were peeping eyes, for weren’t they
husband and wife anyway. \(^{49}\)

The first disappointment was that the baby girl was minor. He thought
he would have sons later. When the baby girl was born he said, ‘A
lovely Lakshmi has entered our lives. Considering his first born
daughter the auspicious goddess of wealth, as in traditional Hindu
household.\(^{50}\) As the six-month milestone neared, in desperation, they
decided to consult a pediatrician. The child was confirmed to be a
paraplegic. Her condition was irreversible. They had to find ways of
coping with the verdict that devastated the young couple. ‘Perin sank
into depression. She stopped meeting friends, comparing milestone
with their children, and devoted herself caring for the little one’s
exhaustive needs.\(^{51}\)

Throughout his professional life Gustad was successful but now
in the real game of life he was a total failure. People pitied him when he
went out with the daughter and pity was an emotion he abhorred:
She was responsible for driving a wedge between him and his mother, him and Perin, for isolating him in his own home, he fumed, watching slumkids play cricket with a plastic bat, rubber ball and empty cartons for a makeshift wicket. 52

Gustad held the ‘baby’ responsible for driving a wedge between him and his mother. He admired the health of the poor children and said; how healthy they looked even though they were so poor! His mother tried to reason out with him that the deformity wasn’t the baby’s guilt that a handicapped child in fact needed more love and that in the form of ‘Tina’ God had thrown a challenge at them. But these words had no effect on Gustad and he would say ‘Couldn’t they pay the hospital for taking care of Tina. Shocked at the sentence his mother would say, “I am ashamed of you!” 53

When Tina’ first birthday was celebrated Gustad drank too much in the party and spent the evening with Namrata an airhostess by profession and showed interest in her:

He didn’t really enjoy the party. He drank too much, didn’t bother making contacts, but spent the evening with a woman in a low-cut crimson dress with side slits revealing shapely thighs, Namrata was an airhostess... through out the evening he didn’t mention Perin or Tina... 54

Back home he felt the urge to make love to his wife so much that he literally tried to rape her as she was refusing him and she was quite tired after the party. He was hurt as this was the first time in four years that this wife had refused his invitation of lovemaking. He felt he had been a good husband providing with all amenities of life and paying them monster’s bill. Tina was not entitled to his conjugal rights. He decides to get his way. He wanted the lovemaking to be enjoyable the way it would be before, the villain Tina entered their life. ‘He tried to
explore her body by kissing and caressing but it didn’t arouse any feelings in her. Still he forced ‘his way entering her. It was the most unsatisfying sexual experience of his life.’

He wanted the whole act of lovemaking to be two sided affair but since it had become a one way the whole act had no charm for him. He had become hungry for love and wanted a partner who cared for him. He makes an announcement. ‘If any more juice is made in this house today I’ll go out to lunch with the airhostess I met at last night’s party. We’ll get a variety of juices at the Taj.’

He wanted a partner who would love him passionately in bed. He just wanted to fulfill his sexual desires and so he decides to begin his double life. Perin says:

*People with less money make better fathers. Without pride and prestige hangups. Have you noticed the boy without legs in the slum? Every day his father carries him to the fishing boat and takes him out to sea. You’re not the only man with a handicapped child!*  

Perin wants Gustad to take care of the child. Gustad never took the child and never loved Tina. He always thought that Tina was a curse to him. When he phones Namrata the airhostess whom he had met at the party he finds peace at least away from Tina and away from his beloved wife who loved the one he hated. In this story Pestonji once again manages to point out a negative trait in a Parsi male character whereby they ditch their wives, were disloyal to them, just to fulfill their sexual urge. When men can’t fulfil their sexual desires at home, they go out in search of other women to fulfill their lust. If they have the true love towards their wives then they sacrifice their desires for their beloved ones, wife and children.

In a personal interview when Pestonji was asked, ‘what is wrong with the Parsi community?’ She answered, ‘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. Pestonji through her stories focuses on both the sides of human character. These stories are the real projectors of Parsi people, whether good or bad. These stories have autobiographical elements, which are the outcome of Pestonji’s day-to-day life experience, as a writer and a journalist. She fulfills the role of a storyteller and a mythmaker.

In *The Verdict* Pestonji brings forth the irresponsibility of Parsi father towards his daughter as she is born abnormal. And she also brings forth various problems which a mother has to face. Gustad and Rerin a Parsi couple, lives happily but after the birth of abnormal daughter how their life changes forever. Gustad being man enjoys power and freedom whereas Perin being woman has to suffer and takes complete responsibility on her shoulders. Gustad enjoys double life with Perin his wife and Namrata his ‘other’ Perin is unable to resist against the man dominated society as she submits herself to Gustad.

*Growing up* is the eighth story in the collection of short stories in *Mixed Marriage and Other Stories*. Pesonji in an interview said:

*From the mid 80s I had been writing about street kids, their Feeds, maltreatment of kids, NGO projects, films about kids, etc. Very... the experiences of children in the streets have been incorporated into the narrative.*

Hormazd came from a middle class family who could ill afford to make donations, yet he was confident of raising much more than other. Hormazd has great concern for Shiva.

Malini took Shiva to her father who was a doctor. Her father detected the malfunctioning of the heart. In addition to this glandular
problem Shiva required valve replacement surgery, without it he had barely a year to live. ‘How many times have you been told not to tease Shiva, he has glandular problem. His body doesn’t function normally, so he needs more food. Woh uski bemari hai.’ ⁶⁰

Hormazd was touched by the way Malini got personally involved in the case. She took Shiva to her father and her father referred his case to one of his friends named Dr. Mirchandani, a surgeon and requested him to operate free on Shiva and was now raising funds for medical and hospitalization expenses. Hormaz wanted to impress her by raising a large sum himself. Malini discloses to the child Shiva that soon he needs to be operated and he need not be afraid of it. She tells Shiva: ‘You can trust Dr. Mirchandani. He’s a brilliant surgeon and a good human being. He’ll make sure the staff treats you properly,’ Malini tried reassuring the child. ⁶¹

Hormazd takes Shiva who is soon to be operated to a treat of Biryani at his favourite Madina Restaurant. Shiva feels he is being pampered as he is soon to die, at this Hormazd says that he would be fit and fine like the Coconut Wala uncle. It is then that Shiva discloses a dark secret:

‘I don’t want to be like that coconut-Walla’
‘Why?’
‘He does bhai-chara with the boys and only gives ten rupees.’
‘Ten rupees for what?’
Bhai-chara’
‘What’s that?’
Shiva didn’t know how to explain.
‘Touching…Tickling…inside the pants..’
The pants…Hormazd was shocked. As much at the fact for the sexual abuse as at the child’s nonchalance in talking about it. ⁶²

When Shiva discloses the dark secret, Hormazd is not only shocked to know about sexual abuse of small street kids. A new
concept that he comes across is ‘Bhai-chara’ but also that the meaning that the old man would make. The young boys touched his private parts and he paid them money for it. The old man would threaten them with dire consequences if they tell anyone about it. Hence, Shiva didn’t want to become like the Coconut Wala and he hated him.

Hormazd was unable to sleep the whole night after the disclosure of Shiva’s sexual abuse. And that night was his growing up night. He realizes the world in existence and values of the world. Hormazd has sympathy for Shiva. He grew up and tried to get closer to Malini. He gathered courage to face his father and booked two tickets one for himself and one for his dream girl, Malini.

Malini managed to collect the amount and Shiva was to be operated soon. Seeing the problems of street children, Hormazd too learnt to face his problems boldly. The present story focuses on the writers’ point of view succinctly. Realization of the complexity of life is the first step to its solutions, which may not be necessarily straightforward or simplistic and the night of growing up is the dawn of wisdom. Thus Pestonji has revealed the dark side of human life and the way in which street kids are been sexually abused and used by man who is the crown of creation.

In growing up Pestonji highlights the various consequences which are faced by street children and the way in which they are exploited by the centre/ power holders. Shiva belongs to the periphery whereas Hormzad represents the centre. Pestonji reveals the dark side of human life which is unbelievable. Where street kids are sexually exploited and abused. Hormzad is able to resists against such things and gain confidence to face the challenges of the global world. It is night of
The ninth story in the collection of short stories of *Mixed Marriage and Other Parsi Stories* is *Raghu*. The theme of the story is touching as it sheds light on the conditions of the aged people who are helpless and miserable and have no one to look after them. They have no option either to beg or to starve. At least in Western countries such people are taken care of by institutions like Home for the Aged, but in India the condition of old people is miserable.

'It’s criminal! The way old people are treated in this country makes my blood boil!’ fumed Jehangir… ‘There should be social security. In America even people with families can live in homes for the aged.’ ‘There the aged are dumped into homes by families who don’t want the bother of looking after them and here they’re left to die in the streets!’

Jehangir and Mahrukh are a middle aged Parsi couple who had a bungalow at a hill station called Lonawala where they came to spend their weekend. ‘Kohistan’ was an old property. Five acres of land with tall trees shading a seven-room bungalow with high ceilings and verandahs running all around an architectural style suited to cool in the days before air conditioning. The kitchen and servants quarters were in a separate structure connected to the main house by a shaded stairway.

The social and cultural differences are highlighted by the writer, the way in which aged people are treated in America and the way in which they are left to die on streets in India. One day when Jehangir and his wife were on their way to the farmhouse he caught a glimpse of Raghu who used to deliver newspaper at their doorstep. No matter what the season was he would do his work regularly and sincerely. Now that his wife had died, he had nobody in the world to take care of him.
The writer in this story highlights, unexpectedly, the positive trait of the Parsis. The sympathetic nature and generosity where Jehangir, against the wishes of his wife Mahrukh decides to bring Raghu to his farmhouse and support him in his old age. He takes him to his farmhouse and gives him a ‘kholi (a room) next to Praful and Heerabai who tended the garden and cooked for Jehangir and Mahrukh. Mahrukh’s first impression was that Raghu was a beggar. She tells Jehangir that he is a beggar. To this Jehangir’s response was that:

‘I’m not keeping beggar in the house!’ ‘Raghu is not a beggar! He’s been a working person all his life, delivering our newspapers for thirty-five years. He’s been reduced to begging because he has no family and is too old to work.’

Mahrukh discouraged her husband from keeping Raghu telling him ‘who could pay his medical bills when he fell ill or who is going to take care of this old man? Because of Jehangir ‘Raghu’ came to occupy a kholi on the Boyce estate at Lonavala a hill station in the Western Ghats, where Mumbaikars maintain weekend bungalows.’

Mahrukh would get irritated whenever he spat the saliva that he would collect in his mouth. Even Jehangir would say he smells. Both of them thought that he should have a bath. ‘Jehangir tried to raise his tolerance.’ Six weeks later Raghu fell ill. So Jehangir called Dr. Somani, borrowed money for medicines from an acquaintance and prepared whatever diet the doctor prescribed for the old man.

Raghu had to be kept in doors due to heavy rains. One weekend Jehangir caught him relieving against a tree and was very angry with him. He started abusing him and threatening to throw him in the gutter from where he had brought him. One weekend Raghu sat down to tell Jehangir his story. He had a wife named ‘Saraswati’ whom he called ‘Saru.’ They were childless. People suggested him to remarry but he
did not do so. This made his wife happy and she took extra care of him for being so good-natured and considerate husband. But she died seven years ago and had left for Rahgu a Mangalsutra with seventy-one gold beads that she had made from her earnings and saving. The chain had a Lakshmi pendant of gold in center.

Raghu handed over the gold to Jehangir for having taken care of him during his illness and old age. But Jehangir refused to touch it and said that it should be given to Praful and Heerabai,

‘What should I do with it?’
‘Remember me.’
‘We’ll remember you anyway, Raghu.’
‘Shall we give it to Praful and Heerabai.’
‘They’ve been looking after you.’
‘Give them the beads but you keep the Lakshmi.
This is an old man’s blessing.’

Raghu insisted that Jehangir should keep the Lakshmi pendant as it would bring wealth and good luck to his family. After two years, Raghu died and his trunk was opened. No gold was found but when his ashes were handed over to them big ‘nuggests’ of gold. Pestonji has a hundred and eight years old bungalow in Lonavala, where she spends her weekends and loves to sit and write. There are many autobiographical elements in the story and they are fictionalized by her. She had a very good servant at Lonavala, who took care of her children and the garden and the big bungalow which she possessed. Thus the writer has combined the fictional world with the language, culture and the peripheral character of Raghu by presenting him as the central character or the protagonist of the story.

As a product of post-enlightenment democratization and capitalist development, fiction is linked to its discursive context, across languages and cultures. With it dialogic potential and plurality of perspectives, it also uniquely signifies the multiplicities and complexities of the
narrated realities. As a narrative mode of enquiry it is concerned with the peripheries and margins of the represented reality and the signified world of human experiences, as it expands its boundaries further on and on into the less known and the less represented.⁶⁸

Pestonji being Parsi and a fictional writer narrates her experiences, the realities of language and culture to which Raghu belongs to. Though there are so many multiplicities and complexities of the realities but they are properly narrated by Pestonji. The writer is not only narrating a story but language, culture and its context. Pestonji represents through the character of Raghu, the marginalized, the subaltern, the voiceless, peripheral character who is brought to center by Pestonji in her story.

The tenth story in the collection of *Mixed Marriage and Other Parsi Stories* is *Games*. The theme of the story is quite unusual. The story begins with two friends Boman and Maneck playing a game of tennis. It was their daily ritual to play the game. They never missed the game unless and until they were ill or out of town. After the game they would go into the club house for breakfast and shower before going off to work.

*The tennis game was a morning ritual. Unless Maneck or Boman were ill or out of town they never missed the game. Each morning would find them in white shorts and sweat shirts driving to the gym from their separate residences at Water Field Road and Carter Road.*⁶⁹

Maneck was small built with fair skin, a contrast to the bespectacled heavy jawed Boman who played tennis to lose his weight. When Boman got married to Anahita, she tried to break their ritual only for few days. After their honeymoon, once again Boman stuck to the game ‘like a temple priest to his morning ablutions.’⁷⁰ Unknown to Anahita for few weeks Boman and Maneck would arrange to go late to work.
One day a girl named Arshiana came to Maneck’s clinic, she was diagnosed as having jaundice and since she was new to the city Maneck went out of his way not just to prescribe medicines but also suggested a dabba service of her sister, supplying Parsi meals. That was the beginning of their attraction for each other.

When Arshiana gave a painting as token of thanks to Maneck for having helped her, Boman and other friends thought that they were in love and started spreading this rumour. Maneck invites Arshiana to attend a party, where he realizes that it wasn’t a party for an artist. Because he and his friends were not interested in paintings:

*The only time art would be mentioned was when M.F. Hussain was up to one of his outlandish pranks like walking barefoot into the elitist Willingdon club, or passing off draped sheets and old newspapers as a work of art, or painting multi-coloured squiggles to the rhythm of a tabla. Needless to say he’d be severely pilloried.*

When Boman gets the news of Maneck and Arshiana, he gets jealous and starts asking him whether he has kissed her or not. Maneck realizes that his friend is not ready to believe him and insists on telling him that she’s just a friend. ‘So the artist is a ‘she.’ Anahita! Danesh! The artist is Maneck’s girl friend.’ Though Maneck was attracted to Arshiana he was not actually in love with her. He didn’t want to miss all the ‘fun’ he was having with his friend whenever he felt the urge for it without any ‘bindings.’

He tries to make Boman jealous. ‘Maneck had already decided that he would not respond to provocations, and smiled good-naturedly, knowing this was the expected response.’

He didn’t go to gym for three days. As expected, Boman tries to call Maneck. He didn’t answer the call but told the receptionist to answer the call. ‘As Anahita flourished a crude sketch of donkey eating...”
grass below which was written ‘Maneck ghass khaaech’, the room erupted in guffaws. This was worse then he’d anticipated... ‘Tell me who’s winning’ he said trying to revert attention to the game.’ Boman gets angry and his doubts turn into real belief that there is an affair between Maneck and Arshiana. Boman enters Maneck’s house and enquires about his girl friend. Maneck says that she’s in the bathroom. When Boman goes there he splashes a bucket of water at him and again they start their fun and end up in bed. ‘To cool you off’, smiled Maneck calmly. The laughter, pumelled each other on shoulders, stomach, chest, chased each other around the house and ended up in the bed.’

In this story Meher Pestonji highlights the negative trait of Parsi community. Boman and Maneck are two friends and Pestonji resists against such kind of relationship where she projects her perception of Gay and Bi-sexual relationship. In the present story Pestonji depicts the relationship of Boman and Maneck as Gay and bi-sexual. Arshiana and Anahita resists against such a relationship. Pestonji also depicts the consequences of such a relationship, which may cause AIDS like diseases.

Another story of Pestonji is *The Gift* which she likes most. In an interview Pestonji was asked:

> You have said you like the story ‘The Gift’ from “Mixed Marriage” why? She answered, “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 grand motherhood.

*The Gift* is the story, which Pestonji loves and likes the most. In a letter, she has mentioned:
I am touched with the efforts you’ve made to interpret my stories in your article. I am really happy you mention ‘The Gift’ which is one of my favorite stories, not one of the reviewer has referred to. I only wish your thesis had included my novel Parvez which takes cultural alienation among Parsis.

The theme of the story is emotional and touching. It focuses on how a little girl is attached to her ‘ayah,’ the governess and is heartbroken when she gets married and doesn’t want to be looked after by any other servant. Shahrukh and Zarine is a Parsi couple who are very well-off. They have a daughter named Shernavaz. She goes to school and is looked after by her ‘ayah’ a Christian- Josephine. The parents have a very lavish life style and enjoy late-night parties. In the morning, Zarine and Shahrukh are unable to send their daughter to school. Hence they have engaged an ayah who attends to their daughter’s needs and takes good care of her. Shernavaz also loves Josephine and is very much attached to her ‘may I come in?’ she asked gingerly opening the door- no reply. ‘Mummy?’ she called a little louder. Zarine stirred and stretched out her arms. The child ran into the, snuggling into the warmth of her mother's body.

Under Josephine’s care Shernavaz was growing up into well mannered child. It was the influence of the convent educated Josephine that Shernavaz was so well behaved but Zarine and Shahrukh were under the impression that their cultured genes were responsible for her good behaviour.

Zarine and Shahrukh were delighted at their daughter… They put it down to their cultured genes. ‘Good manners have been ingrained in us for generations,’ they would say when visitors commented on Shernavaz’s upbringing.

For them Josephine is just a servant where as to their daughter she is a surrogate mother, a friend and a companion.

Meher Pestonji: Colonial Ethos
One day she was making pillowcases. On enquiring why she was making so many pillowcases, she said that she was making two dozen for her trousseau and that she was getting married soon. Upset over the news Shernavaz tells her mother that she would go and scold Josephine for not telling her such important news. After knowing that Josephine is getting married and will leave her for good, ‘the daughter spends, the first sleepless night of her life. Wondering what she would do without Josephine.’

Zarine is worried, who will replace her and whether Shernavaz would get adjusted to new ‘ayah.’ But when Josephine gives the news that she has thought of getting Martha, her fifteen year old sister in her place. Zarine is a little relieved and feels that Shernavaz would not find her different from his sister. Shernavaz is so attached to Josephine that she thinks of buying a small Gift for her as a token of her love and remembrance.

Shernvaz takes out Rs. 327 from her Piggy Bank and tells her father to take her to a watch showroom that to an expensive one- Titan. She chooses an expensive watch, she had only Rs.327 her father adds Rs. 800. She keeps telling him that she would return his money and keeps embarrassing him. She feels that Josephine would wear the watch daily and remember her from John Baptist’s house. At last the day arrives when Josephine is getting married. Josephine accepts the gift given with so much of love and tells Shernavaz to put the watch on her hand. She notes the time 11.25 on her wedding day. She tells her that she would remember her every day at 11.25 that Shernavaz had given her the lovely watch with so much love. When she meets her in the Church, ‘their tear filled eyes locked. Then their families claimed them.’ They both look at each other with tears as they part away.
The storywriter focused on the existing problem of elite society and their parents, where they have lots of enjoyment. They attend parties and films and forget their small lovely children, where as these children they don’t need anything else, if their parents love is with them in general and in particular as far as the Parsis are concerned. There are two sides, which are focused by Pestonji. The modern way of life and issues and problems of kids as they suffer in their elite way of life. That they are deprived of love and affection from their parents. Children need parents, if not, the one who love’s them takes the place of their parents.

Meher Pestonji focuses on the negative trait of Parsi community. Josephine who belongs to the periphery is brought to the centre by the writer. Shernavaz the daughter of Parsi couple who belongs to the elite section of the society is being marginalized by her parents. But finally Shernavaz is able to resists against the dominant bloc and finds her own identity.

The Last Stop is the last story in the collection of short stories Mixed Marriage and Other Parsi Stories. The theme of the story is pathetic and revolves around the fact that how young girls are married off to wealthy Arabs to fight off poverty. The story is about a poor girl named Mumtaz who earned her living with her poor parents by stitching buttons and taking hemming job-work. She earned a meager amount of twenty rupees per day. There was no other way to improve. The only way to escape poverty was to get married to a wealthy Arab.

‘It is my opportunity to escape poverty, Khursheed,’ said Mumtaz pronouncing the Parsi name with a Muslim accent. ‘I’m tired of stitching buttons onto pants and shirts day after day. Earning twenty rupees after seven-eight hours of work. My mother stitches, I stitch, and at
the end of the day all we earn goes on food and bus fares… If I marry Yusuf, life will change.’

To this, Khorshed replies:

*Have you lost your senses! Selling yourself to the highest bidder in the marriage market! The way out of poverty is through education. Marriage can be more disastrous then poverty.*

She lived in a ‘chawl’ in Madanpura and her neighbours were Anwar and Saifuddin who plied a taxi in shift. Sakinabai was a school teacher in a Municipal school. Ram Mohan Shetty owned the Udipi hotel and Haroonbai was the master cutter from whom Mumtaz and her mother got stitching order.

Mumtaz is described as short, plump and pretty, with a round face and up turned nose. And Khorsed is described as a thin, bespectacled woman in her late thirties. She was graduate. She had studied in English Medium institutions and worked in a bank and under her leadership the women of their neighbourhood had formed an informal Mahila Mandal. Khorshed had also come to stay in their neighborhood. She couldn’t afford better accommodation on her salary as a bank clerk. She had won her neighbours’ respect.

*She kept it at one end of a shelf above her bed alongside the alarm clock and half a dozen books… the shelf were photographs of her parents and prophet Zarathustra lit up with an oil lamp. She also kept her kusti on top of her prayer book, Zend Avestha, though she rarely used it while repeating five yatha, Ahu vairyos and three Ashem vohus each night covering her head with a dupatta. Three years ago she had stopped wearing her sudra.*

Here Pestonji elaborately describes the Parsi culture. The way they believe in Zarathustra their Prophet. Parsis prayed. While reciting these prayers the women cover their head with the dupatta.
The Parsis in India are those people who are in minority. These people migrated from Persia to India in 7th century A.D. after the conquest of Persia by the Arabs. The wrench of having lost the original home continues to haunt many Parsi writers. Meher PESTONJI on the contrary makes a conscious assertion of her identity and mirrors the psyche of her marginalized community along with its cultural, historical, social, economical, geographical problems and plights. Homi Bhabha rightly points out the cultural identification which is called as loss of identity by Julia Kristeva. Khorshed’s aim in life was to be a dancer. ‘She ended lamely. She used to keep this dancer on her dressing table.’ Mumtaz would assist Khorshed in solving problems of miserable women. Now that there was a proposal from wealthy Arab for Mumtaz, Khorshed felt it was not correct for such a fiery feminist to sell off herself by marrying an Arab.

There were many problems of the neighborhood women like ‘Tasneem was being harassed for dowry which is not a Muslim practice, Farzana was periodically beaten up by an alcoholic husband. Dipika was hard pressed to stretch a modest budget to feed seven adults and three children in the most overcrowded room of the chawl. Discussing problems provide catharsis and lifted sagging spirits, though the women know solutions weren’t round the corner.’

It was decided that the Arab would pay for the expenses of the wedding from both the sides. Everyone in the chawl was invited. The wedding was going to deprive Khorshed of her only real friend in Madanpura. The other attacked Mumtaz’s spontaneity and vivacious curiosity. Khorshed did’nt want to attend the wedding. She later on meets Navaz and all her memories of the past come back. When she
was involved with Jamshed due to her gullibility signed papers trustingly his false promises, then disappearances, her turmoil the late abortion, and Sarosh kaka Navaz father’s wagging finger.

Now that Mumtaz was married, God had sent Navaz in Khorshed’s life. ‘It was time to open closed doors.’ Meher Pestonji used Khorshed as her mouthpiece. She was equally active social worker, working for underprivileged sections of the society. The way in which women have been deprived of their rights is shown through this story. It also highlights the violence of women on women. Though women are the sufferers by the dominant class of men but still there exists another violence of women. As mother-in-law or all the roles of women-in-laws where she becomes the master and others are slaves. It is very easy for a man to divide and rule. The television of 21st century plays an important role to empower women with their rights but to entertain them with the so-called television serials where fifty to sixty percent of women are involved wasting their time, money, and life.

To have a better future for peripheral sections of the society Pestonji suggests various messages through these stories. The stories are the example of the burning and non-burning issues of the society.

There are autobiographical elements in the story, but still Pestonji manages to create beautiful, imaginative fictional world, where these characters dwell. She is the only creative writer, who created such a beautiful world with all its problems and plights.

Using the terminology of Robert E. Park, one could describe an average Parsi as a marginal man, “a cultural hybrid” sharing the cultural life and traditions of two distinct problems… which never completely interpreted and fused. This feeling is the root cause of most of the problem of adjustment that the Parsis are obliged to face.88
The storywriter has criticized the false sense of humanity, respectability and philanthropy in more than one story. The Parsis who are portrayed by Pestonji are the best with claustrophobia. They don’t allow people to convert to Zoroastrianism. The Parsis believe that their religion is rare and their prayers are more powerful than any one else in the world. And they don’t take their religion seriously. The storywriter confines to a limited period. Despite the constraints, the writer has been able to find enough elbowroom for occasional comments on some burning issues of our time. It provides criticisms of the Parsi life. These stories raise contemporary issues like, destitution and growing commercialization, mixed marriage and its consequences, communalism, the isolation of an individual in an urban setting and the urgent and need of freedom, a recurring dilution of human values, Gay relationship, feminism, issues of woman, issues of marginalized or peripheral people, issues pertaining to religion, children, elite, parents, so on and so forth.

The storywriter is critical of the treatment meted out to them by the society. The government does not pay attention to their problems. Meher Pestonji thinks that the only way out to get rid of poverty is through education. She transformed her experiences into the fictional world by creating fictional character and the day-to-day burning issues through these stories.

Meher Pestonji remarkably fulfils the role of a writer, myth maker and a folk historian or a preserver of collative tradition. Through these stories the writer’s sensitivity is revealed to a variety of issues connected with the Parsi community in particular and Indian society in general.
SADAK CHHAAP:

After you’re born
You cannot fit back
Into mother’s womb
You have no choice
But to bump, bruise, bleed
And still crawl on and on
One day you stand
Then walk
Then run
Now when you fall
You can always
break a bone.39

Meher Pestonji, the writer of Sadak Chhaap begins the text with the above poem, which suggests birth, struggle, and death without any choice. The theme of the story is sad as it shed lights on the hardships faced by street-kids. The story is heart breaking and touching. It is about the main character Rahul. When Pestonji was asked, ‘Do you think the work of art you have produced contains semiautobiographical elements?’ she answered…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.40 Another question which was asked to Meher Pestonji was Sadak Chhaap meant to visualize social reforms for children? And the answer she gave serves the purpose

“for Sadak Chhaap grew out of my journalistic writings on street children. From the mid 80’s I had been writing about street kids-their needs, maltreatment of kids, NGO Projects, films for and about kids, etc, very little of the book is pure fictional (other than the central idea of finding an abandoned baby on a railway platform) Rahul, the protagonist, is the amalgamation of several kids I’ve met. The experiences of children in the streets have incorporated into the narrative.

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
Meher Pestonji was invited to give lectures on creative writing in the Dept of English, Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar Marathwada University, Aurangabad. In her lecture she mentioned that the protagonist in the story is Rahul, a young boy living in the streets of Bombay. His real name is Rasool. The author calls the boy Rahul in the story. Pestonji being active social worker wanted to bring back Rasool from the dirty world of drugs. But Rasool refused to come back to his original life after being used by the paedophiles. The experience of Rasool is narrated in Sadak Chhaap. The author wants to focus on the plight of the downtrodden Muslim children in the story. Generally the tourists suspect such urchins to be terrorists. Hence these Muslim children are plagued by two menaces in their own native land. They are dogged by intense grueling poverty and they are feared by the travelers for terrorists.

When Pestonji was asked, ‘what steps would you take to improve the life of slum dwellers and poor children?’ She answered, ‘First, recognize they exist and are integral part of urban society. Our fruit vegetable, vendors, bredwala, baida-wala, our domestic help, taxi-drivers, peon, municipal school teachers… all live in Slums-because urban housing is unaffordable. Their services are indespensible for the citizens.‘

The author says a lot of such children can be improved only if the corporations and the state government at large take cognizance of the plight of such children. They don't have places to sleep, food to eat
and clothes to wear. Then only there will be a meaningful life for them and then only they can escape a horrible life of gutter’s snipes. Pestonji as a social worker mentions at the beginning of the text the names of the children with whom she interacted and worked for them. The story is born out of her day to day experience of helping these urchins. Therefore she comes to know by their names. Therefore the story has these names of children such as Shafique, Abdul, Santosh, Vishal, Rasool to show her personal intimacy, care, and concern for these downtrodden children. It is about the main character Rahul (Rasool) and highlights the problems faced by the street kids.

It is the story of a ten year old boy named Rahul. He lived with his father, mother, and sister. His parents worked as laborers. His father met with an accident at the construction site and died. Their neighbours fed them for three days. According to their custom his mother had to feed their whole community as it helped them at the time of his father’s funeral. For feeding their community Rahul’s mother took loan from the contractor and he agreed to help her as he thought of using her for his sex satisfaction.

For three days neighbours provided food for his mother his sisters and him. On the fourth day his mother had to feed the community; it was mandatory for the peace of his father’s soul. The labour contractor advanced the loan she begged for. And their poverty level dipped even lower.95

Her utter poverty compels her to borrow money from the contractor. Consequently she ends up by becoming his pawn and she gives an opportunity to satisfy his bodily thirst. Thus she ruins her life to bury her husband and to fulfil the religious rituals. The widow is unable to pay the loan and she is made a slave by the contractor. He uses her as he likes. He would always threaten her by saying: ‘who are
you to tell me? Don’t forget you are repaying debt.’ She continues to argue ‘you make me cook for you. My children slept hungry.’

One day the contractor comes hungry and angry too. Rahul’s mother hadn’t kept the food ready as there was nothing to cook. He starts abusing her in front of Rahul. Due to hunger, his anger flares up. He wants to satisfy his sexual urge and starts ‘pinning her against the wall, his hand landing on her breast like a claws.

*He was swaying unsteadily on his feet. He had evidently been drinking. ‘Boy, get out,’ he snapped at Rahul. ‘If my food isn’t ready I might as well have something else first.’ Mother gasped. ‘Shut up. Not in front of the child.’*

‘That’s why I’m telling him to get out,’ he muttered, hanging towards her. Later, she cried, backing off. ‘This will teach you keep my food ready, he said, pinning her…’

This scene was nothing less than a ‘rape scene’ that Rahul must have witnessed in movies a number of times. ‘Rahul couldn’t tolerate any more. He picked up a heavy stone and flung it at the odious one with all his strength. He heard him gasp. He saw a trickle of blood streaming from the left temple. He saw him slump to the ground in heap.’ He falls down at his mother’s feet. Rahul expects his mother to praise him for saving her for the devils clutches who had no shame to have sex in front of small kids. But, instead of praising him realizing what will be the aftermath of the crime she abuses him and calls him ‘Sala badmash what have you done?’

This betrayal leads Rahul to run away from home leaving his mother and sister in lurch at the mercy of the evil/ bad world. ‘That was his last image of her.’ ‘He didn’t want to know if the heap was alive or dead. ‘He didn’t want to face his mother’s betrayal, he had to run away.’ Rahul ran away from home for this reason and never thought of going home. He becomes a rag picker, pick-pocket and a petty thief.
He sleeps on footpath and lives a very hard life. He has a few friends like him. Bablu is one of his close friends. They both enjoy together eating vada pao and watch movie, if they earn well. Otherwise they sleep empty stomach. ‘He had decided to buy Bablu a brand new shirt, take him to a film and get ice cream.’

They earned money and enjoyed their life. These street children face the world bravely and boldly. They face the world in order to survive in this world. Even if they have to commit crimes, meet sadak chhaap Rahul who now wears fancy shoes like Sachin, shirts like. One day something very unusual happens that changes Rahul’s lifestyle. As he was relishing a stolen mango from Karim Bhai’s shop he sees a parcel on the bench of the railway platform. He wonders what’s there inside and is shocked to see an abandoned baby - a girl with her leg burnt and all ants hovering her face. Seeing that the baby is alive, Rahul rushes to call Aparna, who is social worker and whose organization works for street kids which is called ‘sharan’ means shelter.

‘Didi, come fast,’ cried Rahul, pulling the dupatta off her shoulder. She smack him lightly on the wrist. ‘What’s the matter now, Rahul? Is a cop chasing you or a goonda?’

‘Koi nahin! Someone has forgotten a baby on the platform… Big-big ants are on the baby’s face.’

Aparna didi thinks a cop is chasing Rahul and doesn’t’ bother much, but when Rahul narrates the story she rushes to the baby who is unattended and uncared for. She takes the child to a hospital admits in an I.C.U. and files an FIR. Rahul decides to become the father of the girl as no one is ready to take the responsibility of the unwanted child.

‘I became a father yesterday…’
Tell me who the girl is and I’ll do the job for you.
‘No girl…’
Men become men without becoming fathers, what’s the use of becoming a father without a girl.
He is considered as ‘hero’ for this brave act and is praised for it. Aparna appoints him as the health minister in her institution. He tries to leave his old habits and life style for the sake of the little girl whom he named ‘Kajol.’ He stays at ‘Sharan’ the institution which works for street kids and earns eight to nine hundred rupees per month.

But when ‘Kajol’ is shifted to ‘Bal Kendra’ where she is taken care by Sister Margaret, who is in search of a client who would adopt Kajol. Rahul goes and tells the visitors that Kajol’s leg won’t grow due to burn and they should not adopt the girl. Sister Margaret finds out that Rahul is the main culprit in sending away the customers interested in adopting the girl. She throws Rahul out of ‘Bal Kendra’ and again Rahul leads a life of ‘Sadak Chhaap.’ This time for the worst:

The best part of being at Bal Kendra was seeing Kajol everyday. She had started following him around just as Munni used to. Every evening he would choose her dress for the next day. And come to the nursery to find her bathed, dressed and spiced up for her outgoing in the garden, ‘what’s so especial about this child? She likes any other: Rahul whirled, ‘she’s mine. I found her,’ Gopi suppressed scornful laugh. ‘Not for long she’ll go like the others.’ She won’t…”

Once again he’s on streets but decides to earn more money to run a taxi business. ‘His acting earned less than his creativity deserved. ‘Life at the Kendra was comfortable but boring for Rahul.’ When he is away from Bal Kendra, his life becomes a miserable one.

First, he acts as a commission agent, who takes foreigners (tourists) to hotels and shops, then he dupes Arabs as they are supposed to spend lavishly, then he almost sells the girls to marry a sixty five year old Arab. Just because it is believed that the first person to deflower a virgin is cured. Rahul spent rest of the day learning the tourist trade.

‘A young boy alone in the streets of Bombay speaking a foreign language that’s amazing,’ said the foreigner sounding genuinely impressed.’ then the worst day of his life arrives when a foreigner named Greg lures him to a hotel room with the help of an Indian called Narain. Both of them sodomised Rahul, took naked photos as they run a website of pornographic photos- and have been running this racket since a long time.

‘Narain meet Rahul, said Greg, dragging the tongue on his palate to stretch out the ‘I’. ‘I’ invited Rahul to join us for beer but he doesn’t drink.’
‘You can have pepsi’ smiled Narain, flashing white teeth.

Greg and Narain convinced Rahul that he is going to get money to do a job. He dropped his threatening stance. ‘‘c’mon, man.’ Enjoy yourself. We’ve just having fun. He put an arm around Rahul’s waist and lowered his face, giving Rahul a full blooded kiss on the mouth. His teeth felt like scorpion, his body smelt of sweat. Rahul could not extricate himself from the vice like grip on his mouth. He shuddered. Never had the impulse to run been so strong. But he was naked. His clothes had been taken away.’

The game went on all the night. ‘Different posters, different objects one photograph had Rahul’s mount gagged by a chain. For another he was strung by a leather belt from the fan with Greg ejaculating under him. It was the longest night of his life. Tasting fear in the most intense form he had known, he screamed, cried, pleaded but
the more he begged to get released the more Greg got turned on. When at last his clothes were returned he staggered away, half deranged. Instead paying ten thousands as promised, he was paid only two thousand. Rahul screams, yells, and is scared to death. But the two gave him just a small amount for all the fun they had at his cost and would be doing a great deal of business by selling the CDs.

Rahul is out of his mind, as he never imagined he would land up in such a mess. He wants to forget everything that happened with him that night. He wants to forget on all the pain and misery. He becomes thin and weak. ‘In a weak he switched from ‘charas’ to ‘garada’ his regular supplier, in a rare fit of generosity, offered free trips to tide over his depression. Brown sugar deadened more effectively. Grateful Rahul inhaled bitter fume, in one nostril at a time, from powder burnt on silver foil, horror images.’ Then Rahul succumbed to the vendor. ‘Bought a vial. Then he met Harsh who showed him how to boil and dissolve powder in lime water, cool and strain it, fill a hypodermic needle, finding vein was painful. Harsh tied a rubber tightly around Rahul’s upper arm. As a vein bulged, he jabbed thrice before making the connection. Rahul winced as he drew blood in and out of the syringe to mix to it with heroin. Then he shot into Rahul’s vein.’ One day he remembers to call ‘Sharan.’ Shekhar and victor come running to his rescue and Aparna didi- the social worker all work hard to bring Rahul to his normal self.

Karim bhai the fruit vendor dies of cancer but leaves a note for Rahul- that he had taken his money long back and used it but now he is leaving his shop so that he starts a new life in a decent way.

No ! no, bachchu! I will not give you money, look at your condition! Karim bhai’s voice was shaking. It’s my money. I want it,’ snarled Rahul.109
Karim Bhai when he was alive wanted to help Rahul with money, food, shelter. But Rahul wanted to fulfill his urgent need to get drugs for himself. When Karim Bhai took him to the hotel he shouted “thief, thief! This man is thief! Rahul grabbing a knife and staggering towards Karim Bhai… Four men restrained Rahul. ‘Blood shot eyes glared, animal-like. In a sudden fit he flung off the hands, flung away the knife, grabbed a fifty rupee note from the cash counter and ran.’

Victor reached first. He found Rahul slumped against the phone booth. A skeleton with long matted hair, shrunken skin sinking into hollows between ribs. Aparna the social worker and the others like Victor wanted to bring Rahul to his original position with his health and life. But he says, ‘everyone has to die.’


As Pestonji has rightly mentioned, the character doesn’t want to come to his original life. He doesn’t want to get rid of drugs but accepts the life of druggists. Pestonji also mentions that sometimes, the character goes out of the control of the creative writer. The creative writer creates a character, but the character takes his/her own decision in life and the creative artist is helpless. The obvious reason for not mentioning Kajol and Chandni in the end is that they are fictional characters. Meher Pestonji rather focuses on the life of Rasool (Rahul) in the story.

The colonial hanging is still found after the end of colonialism. The foreigners, the tourists are central to exploit the minority, marginalized peripheral groups. There are cultural differences which divide India from the rest of the world. There are many unsolved
problems of the minorities. The periphery is exploited and there should be equal rights given to very individual in our country. The Indian police take care of the tourists, who visit India, but no one cares for what these tourists do by making, pornographic films on helpless Indians. It is a shameful deed. ‘The minorities are generally afraid of the nationalist governments as well as the state and its apparatuses.’

The street children are pushed down to the level of the beasts.

In a personal interview Pestonji was asked, ‘Do you think the work of art you have produced contains semi-autobiographical elements?’ She answered:

…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…”

Another question which was asked to Pestonji was:

‘Why was your novel ‘Pervez’ banned? She said: ‘Pervez’ was not banned. Rather it was not properly advertised and marketed. The theme of the novel shows the Parsi girl’s disturbed mind and her intellectual confusion when the Babri mosque was demolished. The girl is neither a Hindu nor a Muslim. Such a girl takes a balanced and rational view about its demolition. The balanced and rational view of the girl was quickly shattered. Her rational view about the incident was not that strong. It was paralyzed. Consequently, she added an epilogue in which she strongly pleaded on the side of Muslim victims and she requested both the communities to come together to end the holocaust. Moreover, the author did not want the publisher to create a communal storm by publishing the book.”

The theme of the story is based on an inter-caste failed marriage. The story develops against the Hindu-Muslim riots during the demolition of Babri Masjid in 1993. Pervez belongs to a well-off Parsi family and the story begins with her. She leads a lavish life. Her parents
are lenient; therefore she is allowed to go to late night parties with her friend. When she comes home late her parents think she is dating ‘Farhad’ a familiar Parsi boy and take it lightly. One day Farhad calls home and enquires about Pervez and says he has not met Pervez for many weeks. It is then that Pervez has to confront her parents and has to spill the beans that all this while she had been seeing a guy called ‘Fred.’

It was at Anjali’s birthday party that Fred, the guitarist, the trumpeter, the drummer and the clarinet player, met Pervez. She was then with Farhad, with whom the parents allowed her to go. Pervez’s parents thought she was dating Farhad the young Parsi boy but later on they discovered that she was in love with Fred. “Someone will come, Fred. Some one will see us, even as her body responds to his touch…They made love at the oddest of places at every opportunity.”

In the beginning everything is just like a dream come true for Pervez, as is the case in love-marriages. But the fact remains that arranged marriages survive long and there is more love and stronger bond between the couple as compared to love marriages. Pervez feels at the top of the world with Fred and she enjoys the passionate love making, day after day, night after night. But one night something unusual happens. Fred refuses to make love to Pervez who had waited for him for many days at a stretch as he was out with their band. It is then she realizes that Fred is nothing but a ‘Casanova.’ When he had satisfied his lust with other women does he need a wife in bed then? It is too late for Pervez to return back. She hurt her parents, shattered their dreams of seeing their only daughter married to a well off Parsi boy and so she got back the same things that she gave to her parents. She deceived her parents and her husband deceived her.
Meher Pestonji believes in mixed marriage but in most of the cases mixed marriages prove to be a curse rather than being a boon to the couple, children and the society. Pervez is heartbroken when she realizes all the love that was there between her and Fred was only ‘infatuation’ that normally and generally exists between two young and beautiful people, but it passes very soon- when the so called love vanishes it leaves only haunting memories.

The story takes a different turn, not for the worse but for better when Pervez learns that her parents have been killed in a serious car accident. It is then she decides that she would go to stay with her brother and sister-in-law, Darius and Dhun. Her parents had also left a lot of inheritance for her, which she goes to take charge of. She leaves Fred for ever. In the meanwhile Darius, her brother had married a sophisticated lady who does a number of assignments with models. Darius too had become a popular architect. Pervez stayed eight years with the Goan family and lost the sophisticated looks she had before her marriage.

Pervez declined. Before coming to Bombay she had decided not to accept favors from Darius or his wife. “I don’t go to fancy places so I don’t need fancy clothes,” she said.  

She is welcomed by Darius and Dhun is good with her and shares her expensive dresses with Pervez to make her feel comfortable. But Dhun does not like Pervez staying with the Goan family. She says that she seems to be a middle-class and cheap, staying with the Goan family ‘that’s sweet but silly,’ said Dhun, rubbing her finger on the back of her hand. “My husband has only one sister so the least we can do is look after her.’

Pervez stays for sometime with Darius and Dhun but she dislikes their parties and their style of life. She likes peace and privacy. There
are various discussions at one of their parties. Mr Chawla commented on Muslims: Every Hindu worships Lord Ram as ‘maryada purushottam,’ the ideal man exemplifying ideal conduct. Naturally his birthplace is sacred to us. Besides someone has to put Mussal there means a place. For they divide our country, make their Pakistan still want to be big boos here! And Congress party panders to all their whims. Look what they did with that Rushdie book. Muslims demand, congress bans. Before any country in the world.’ Then they discuss the place of women. When Muslims gets tired, and take another woman. They breed like rats. Soon Muslims will be more than Hindus in India. Pervez froze… ‘if divorce were so easier I might have got married interjected Ranjit Gandhi the diehard bachelor.” First become Muslim, and then marry, advised Chawla.’

There are so many misconceptions which people have. They don’t know what Islam is and what are the teachings of Islam, they don’t know who a Muslim is. Any illiterate would say Talaq for three times and woman is divorced is wrong. According to Islam the details are given in what circumstance a woman should be divorced and again divorce is not one sided but it should be from both the sides from husband’s side as well as wife’s side. Allah says in the Holy Quran that if there is something which Allah doesn’t like the most, is Talaq/divorce people quote this out of context.

When Iqbal Rahimtoola enters, they change the topic of discussion and say they are talking about the present government. Meher Pestonji also deals at large with the problems and plight of women in general and Muslim women in particular. Pervez keeps a safe distance from the quest with awkward questions. Farhad also attends the party and Pervez remembers her first kiss. Pawan, Naina, Siddharth,
Vandan, Chawla all attend the party and they enjoy and then they were gone. Leaving Pervez’s imagination full of what they were doing now.’

Meher Pestonji is very much concerned about women. She deals with the problems of the women through her fictional characters, their movement and their understanding of the world in the era of globalization.

_In the women’s movement we try to bring respect to women whether they are waitresses, scientists, or housewives. When women allow themselves to be used as sex objects, when they encourage men to think of them as bodies without brains, without a perspective, they participate in the de-humanization of all women. A single sleazy photograph un-dos all our efforts._”

“Money brings respect.”
“Sex objects are used not respect.”
“You talk of woman’s right to her body.”
“That was in a different context we were talking of sexual freedom, reproductive control”…
“Possessiveness is another face of objectification.”

Though much is talked about Feminism and women’s rights but the real fact lies with those, who really don’t understand what exactly feminism means. Whether it is related to equality or is it so that the only women who understand feminism are to be respected. There are women who think that to be nude is feminist because it’s their body right. There are some who believe in equality, respect and self dignity and Meher Pestonji strongly believe in women’s right with self dignity and respect. ‘It was through Prabha that Pervez learns the feminist dimensions of the build up to Advani’s campaign.’ For years women’s groups have been demanding equality before law for women of different communities,” the women’s conference at Trivandrum was the first to demand a uniform civil code way back in 1984. Now these Hindutva guys have made it into a Hindu versus Muslim Campaign to impose their code on Muslims who have been governed by ‘Shariat
Further, Prabha discusses the famous Shahbanu case. She says ‘Shahbanu was a seventy-five year old woman who went to court when her husband refused to pay maintenance after divorcing her. The court upheld her appeal but Muslim fundas were up in arms because according to the Shariat a man is not obliged to pay maintenance after the three month idaat period. ‘They kicked up a huge campaign till Rajiv Gandhi, caved in and enacted the LAST Muslim women’s’ bill accepting Muslims right to be governed by Shariat Law.’

Meher Pestonji argues on feminist’s movement. All women belong to the peripheral group and they are being oppressed by the patriarchal society. The feminists workers work for the benefit of the society in general and for women in particular. Women can no doubt be differentiated on the basis of their work/job they do. Like the sex workers but it can’t be said they are cheap and they don’t belong to this group of feminist as Darius says:

‘What do you think should be a feminist’s response to women posing topless?’
‘Is that what that model wants to do?’
‘Of course not!’ she lied, ‘it was one of the questions discussed at the women’s meeting.’
‘Feminists should not support cheap women,’ said Darius.
‘Feminists support all women. Including devdasis,’ Girls given to temples at a young age to spend their lives in service of the gods.

The women’s movement was founded on the ground of differences. But according to Lacanian feminism there is no such boundary between male/female. And there is no fixed identity to which the term feminism can be applied. The category ‘woman’ cannot be said to exist, as there is no inherent feminine nature or fixed indent to which the term applies. ‘One result of Lacanian, Feminism, therefore,
was to dissolve the boundary between men and women on which the woman’s movement was founded.’

Critics have various views on feminism. But Meher Pestonji strongly supports the women’s movement to give them dignity, identity and self equality, equality of one self with the other.

The discussion moves on from women to the riots and protests that take place due to the Babri Masjid demolition. Darius, Pervez and Dhun they go on elaborately discussing the issues of the Babri Masjid. As Meher Pestonji said the character of Pervez is fictional, but a neutral character that represents the incidents as it is from a Parsi point of view:

‘Advani’s been arrested in Lucknow to prevent him from reaching Ayodhya,’ commented Darius from behind the Times of India.
‘But now there are riots protesting his arrest,’” said Pervez....
‘I don’t understand why you’re getting so worked up about this Ayodhya business,’ said Dhun....
‘That man stirs up trouble wherever he goes. First he defies the government to arrest him, then he says the courts have no jurisdiction on the Mandir-Masjid issue. He has no respect for law.’

Meher Pestonji criticizes her community for not taking part for the good. The Parsis are no doubt privileged minority in India. But it does not mean that they should sit and observe the evil. They should take an active part in the country’s good. Because it’s long back they left Persia and now they belong to India. Even UNESCO has declared that the Parsis are only handfuls who are left and they are also referred to be endangered species on this earth.

‘Mandir or Masji,. how does it concern us? I can understand Chawla getting worked up. After all he is a Hindu. What are Advani’s followers saying?
That India is for Hindus. Nobody can deny eighty percent of our population is Hindu. In a democracy you have to go with the majority. Even if the majority is misled?

‘We Parsis are such a tiny minority we can’t afford to interfere. If ten Parsis are killed we’ll become extinct. Even UNESCO says so. Besides, why risk upsetting an important client.’

Darius, Dhun, Mr. Chawla, Dilip and Pervez further move into the inquiry of the Babri Masjid. Their discussions are related to the Religion and role of Hindus and Muslims. Instead of riots they want to have a proper solution to the whole issue of Babri Masjid. They suggest that instead of demolition of Babri Masjid the Hindus should build temple next to it. Dilip says ‘till today it’s not certain whether Ram was a historical figure or a mythical hero. We respect him for the moral values he stands for-regardless of whether he lived or was created by an artist writing an epic. How can anyone talk of his birthplace when we don’t even know whether he actually lived?’ To this Mr. Chawla reacts and says, “You Parsis are outsiders. Too western. You don’t know what it is to experience Partition like bloodshed.’

‘Religion comes before law. Law is only hundred years old. Hinduism goes back thousands of years.’
‘Nothing in Hinduism would justify breaking one place of worship to build another,’ said Dilip quietly.
‘Babri Masjid is three hundred years old. Why not build a Ram temple next to it?’

The Parsis never take an active part in any problem that is faced by the country. They are still outsiders in India. According to the Parsis, they haven’t adapted themselves to the Indian culture.

Pervez says that there would be a solution to the whole issue of Babri Masjid. The Hindus would build another Masjid after the demolition of Babri Masjid. To this Daruis says the Hindus will never fulfill such a task. To which Mr. Chawla gets purple and Dhun
Meher Pestonji: Colonial Ethos

intervenes. Pervez moved to Dharavi ‘for the first time in her life with a band of street-theater activists. Behind her a drummer belted out a rhythm on a dholak. The troupe of actors followed. There was a banner named ‘Sati is Murder.’ Prabha’s group was enacting a street play to sate into perspective.’

Meher Pestonji beautifully explains in detail the role of actors on the stage. They play and perform to bring out the awareness of the wrong traditional custom of Hinduism that is after the death of the husband when his dead body is kept on the pyre, the woman has to throw herself in the fire of the husband. It’s a street theater and the drama is performed. The picture is well portrayed in the text:

A woman with a child sucking her breast stood up. “Roop Kanwar was very pure. I saw a photo of her being. Struck by a single ray of height and taken straight to heaven. While her body was burning many miracles happened. Blind people started seeing. People with leprosy were healed.”

“Who told you this?”
“Pundit”
“How did he know?”
“Pundits know such things.”
“Suppose he’s lying?”
“Of course he’s lying!” said the spirited girl in green.
“Isn’t he the same Pundit who forced everyone to pay hundred-hundred rupees for his satyanarayan puja?”

Meher Pestonji criticizes the custom of ‘Sati’ through drama in fiction. The writer uses inter-textuality in her writings which is a post-modern phenomenon. The term ‘Inter-textuality’ has been borrowed and transformed many times since it was coined by Post-structuralist Julia Kristeva in 1966. As a critic William Irwin says the term ‘has come to have almost as many meanings as uses. From those faithful, from Kristeva’s original vision to those who simply use a stylish way of talking about allusion and influence.’

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Pervez, Naina, Pawan, Vandan, Siddharth, Prabha, Saeed and Munawar pulled dining chairs into a semicircle. Siddharth asked Vishal to sing. ‘This is a beautiful song written by Brij Mohan,’ whispered Naina to Pervez.’ Loosely translated, it says,’ Car rying grief in your heart keep walking, despite bleeding feet keep walking.’ ‘Chalo ki aaj sath-sath.. chale zarooratien…,’ chalo ke Khatam ho na jayen, zindagi ki hasratien…’

Meher Pestonji mentions in the Acknowledgement of the novel ‘Pervez’ that ‘I’d like to acknowledge my debt to Brij Mohan, whom I’ve never met, but whose song ‘chale chalon Dilon mein Ghaav’ has helped me pull through unnumerable personal crisis.’ (Acknowledgement of the novel ‘Pervez’) in the period of crisis during the riots due to demolition of Babri Masjid. Meher Pestonji being a journalist, an active social worker participated by helping the people who were affected by the riots. She and her group helped the victims of 1993 riots. Just to gain moral and spiritual support Meher Pestonji loves the song of Brij Mohan.

The riots between Hindus and Muslims break out at Dharavi and these two couples bring out the torture meted out to Muslims. The way the Muslims are tortured and their young and beautiful girls are gang-raped, women are molested and harrassed. The rioters’ didn’t even leave ‘grandmothers’ and raped them on streets. They committed horrific crimes in broad daylight.

There’s a discussion between Siddharth and Pervez. Pervez says, ‘Siddharth helped me in my difficulties. Friendship is more important
than money. Pervez says, ‘capitalists exploit workers.’ There is no escape. You have to go to moneylender even if he sucks your blood.’

Karl Heinrich Marx was a German Philosopher who argued that, ‘Capitalism like previous socio-economic systems will produce internal tensions which will lead to its destruction.’

They discuss capitalism and the way in which the workers are destructed and destroyed and exploited in every walk of life by capitalists, who pay less wages to the workers and earn more profit out of the hard work of the labourers. Siddarth and Pawan are Hindus and they are educated and sensible. They helped Muslim families and exposed the Hindu Shiv Sena activists by taking photographs and publishing daring articles in newspapers. When Pestonji was asked in an interview, ‘What are your views about Muslims as minority community? She said:

One’s attitudes do get influenced with the changing scenario. Throughout the nineties. With the Babri Masjid and Gujarat 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 overarching 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 distances the main steam community from those who wreak havoc in the name of religion.

The Muslim minorities in Mumbai were exploited by the rioters. They were mercilessly killed and women were raped in broad day light. People were burnt alive, shops worth crores of rupees were looted. Dead bodies were lying beyond recognition Pervez is horrified when she gets news and witnesses these crimes but gathers her courage to help to the Muslim families who suffered the most during the riots.
Behind Vishal a group of three women and five men were on the stage to sing a song. The mike was adjusted to the height of Vishal who started singing on the stage “Mandir Masjid gurdwara mein bant liya, bhagwan ko, dharti banti sagar banta mat banto insaan ko.” A man in black shirt appeared on the stage and snatched the mike and said that these people should not create a trouble. Manohar is from the Shaikh. But there is no trouble replied Pervez. Keep away from Koliwada if you know what’s good for you. The social workers when they tried to demonstrate in front of the public to join hands together with the people on the stage, they were being prohibited from doing so by the so called Sainiks.

The communal riots broke and it led to the problems of both the communities. A handful of people just to save their power, their chair, use the common masses for their purpose. Saeed points out the problem of the minorities which they faced being Indian and being Muslim.

Muslims are getting fed up. “said Saeed. “in the train all I hear is people talking against us. That we are dirty, we have too many children, we love Pakistan more than India…..As if there is nothing else to talk about.”

“The Majority of Hindus are not against Muslims.” Countered Siddhartha. “Some people may have got carried away by Hindutva rhetoric but most of us haven’t.”

“There is also caste politics,” said Vishal. “Upper castes don’t like lower castes coming up. After Mandal agitation they are getting scared of OBC…..” Equality is a myth if you’ve a dalit, retorted Siddharth. “It’s nearly fifty years since my community, Mahar converted to Buddhism.”

Siddhartha says to Pervez that ‘you Parsis with your fancy Marine Drive houses know nothing about the grassroots.’ And he adds if they have any problems, the Parsis should call Siddharth on his mobile number for help. ‘If there’s a problem just call me.’ Pervez
realized that no one from Kalina would join the March…’143 Darius narrated an incident that happened due to the riots. He says ‘when Bhatia’s daughter got married they were the only two who were not invited.’144 Due to riots the friends being Muslim were not invited to the Marriage. The group organized a march where all these eminent personalities participated against violence and they all pleaded for peace in the country. They asked to join hands for peace. They want no riots, no violence but peace, love and harmony.

“How would a peace march help?”
“It lets people know that traders of every community, of every profession, believe in religious tolerance. Read the list of participants,” he said, pointing to the news report she had handed him. “J.R.D. Tata, Rajmohan Gandhi, Sunil Dutt, Justice Bakhtawar Lentin, Usha Mehta, Rafiq Zakaria. Also religious heads like Shankaracharya, Swami Agnivesh, Cardinal Pimnta, Maulana, Wajiduddin Khan, Jain Munis, ever out Parsi Dastur Jamaspasa. It would be an hour to walk shoulder to shoulder with someone like J.R.D. Tata.”145

Munawar was Saeed’s brother. ‘Their father studied only up to eight standard Saeed was the first to go to college.’ Siddharth says, ‘Ironically bhoomi pujan for the Ram mandir started after demolishing two small Hindu shrines including a Hanuman temple, many Hindus are upset pointing at that, Hanuman was Ram’s most trusted devotee, that Ram would disapprove of a Hanuman temple being razed to make space for his own. They want a grand Ram temple at Ayodhaya but not at the expense of destroying older ones.’146 Siddharth says that:

“Laldas are with CPI but he’s also head priest of the Ram temple.” “To him Ram Rajya, where Ram’s subjects live in peace and prosperity, is the same as a classless society. He calls VHP leaders opportunists that only perform pujas before cameras and says they are creating insecurity among Hindus only to fill the BJP vote bank. Don’t forget, after they raked up the Ram Ramjanam...”
Any political party in India uses the common masses, their ideologies just to fill their vote banks. The BJP’s strength increased, their seats increased from two to eighty five. They play with the emotions and sentiments of the people. But in the present election of 2009 BJP is badly defeated and Congress came into power. Though the votes lie with the minorities, again it is minority who decide their rulers. They know who should rule the country.

“The people in the villages were wonderful, man,” said Pawan. Both Hindus and Muslims told us they’ve been celebrating each others festivals, and attending each others weddings helping each other through sickness and death. There’re determined not to let outsiders disrupt their lives.”

Both Hindus and Muslims live as friends, enjoy their happiness and sorrow before the riots but as soon as communal riots broke out then their relationship is dead and gone. They are no more friends and take revenge on each other. Twenty years we have been neighbors. Now when its time to leave my body, trouble comes.

When Siddharth, Pervez and other group members went to Khambarwada they saw an old lady and asked her about the tension that was prevailing there. The old lady named Shantabai told that due to communal riots the friendship and neighbourhood had come to an end. For twenty years they were friends, when riots broke out they are enemies to each other. There are various incidences that could be taken account of.

Pestonji once said due to communal riots of 1993, in one day Bombay stock market lost 300 crores of rupee which is the biggest lost for a country like India, which has a long run to achieve its goal to be
developed as a super-power in the world. Meher Pestonji was asked in an interview at Bombay, “How would you describe your socio-religious development?” She said:

*My upbringing has been pretty checkered. My parents separated when I was a few months old. In my early years I was brought up in Lonavala by a childless aunt and uncle who lavished me with love. My uncle was the President of the Anjuman at the Lonavala agiary and we also had Umrigar in Uran. It was normal to have Dastuji is coming over, conducting rituals in the house. Later we moved to Bombay to live with my mother, grandfather, uncle, aunt. My grandfather died when I was eleven after that my mother converted to Christian religion. The Christian influence came into my life by going to church on Sundays and also from the convent school in which I was studying.*

*In college I rebelled against all religions. I wanted to join my friends at jam session on Sunday mornings’, not be cooped up in some goody-goody Sunday school for several years and stopped thinking about religion. If asked I’d declare I was agnostic.*

*Only after my marriage, I came to know the tough side of life, and I turned to religion again. At that time I was writing a book review column for a women’s magazine and accidently I came across the Bhagwad Gita. I started studying it learnt some shlokas, and its teachings remained an internal part of my ethos.*

Meher Pestonji mentioned about ‘Gita’ which is a sacred book of Hindus. The Hindus believe in Bhagwat Gita. Meher Pestonji received a copy of Gita to translate it. And it was during her reading of Gita which brought her back to religion. Pervez is the mouthpiece of Pestonji. Through Pervez Meher Pestonji narrates the importance of Gita in her life. And if one can understand religion then there can’t be communal riots. Because the message which every religion gives is of love, humanity, peace, and harmony.
These ideas are brought up by three different communities. Pervez being Parsi says that the Parsis should take an active part, break their silence and raise their voice against the wrong doers.

A peace committee was formed at Dharavi. Mariamma says, ‘I believe god is one, though we speak to him in different languages… I want to begin this meeting with prayers because we need the help of higher power to restore peace to our localities, our city, our country.’

He told the gathering about Mohalla peace committees at Bhiwandi, a township on the outskirts of Bombay. After riots of 1970’s and 1984, in which seven hundred people were killed, a local police officer DCP Gulabroa Pol initiated regular dialogues between Hindu and Muslim leaders to defuse tensions before violence could erupt. So successful had been his efforts that Bhiwandi had remained peaceful through the current crisis.

People were listening attentively. They knew about the brutal Bhiwandi riots and found it difficult to believe that this communally sensitive town had not got sucked into the vortex of violence. A middle aged man raised his hand and said:

“What can an ordinary man do if his house is attacked, he has to fight back.”

“The mobs were led by outsiders. I have grown up in Palwadi but I couldn’t recognize a single face.”

“Which neighbour will attack another?” said a woman in a black burkha. “We have to come back and live together. Tardabai saved me by waving her mangalsutra at the crowd.” “It was the police…they went on a shooting spree!” Spot a bearded man heedless of the police officers present.”

“This was not a Hindu Muslim riots it was a Police-Muslim riots.”

This has been a common problem whether they are 1993 riots, or Gujarat riots. The people who raised the sword against the common people they are beyond recognition. And that’s why Pestonji has rightly pointed out that the rioters were beyond recognition in Palwadi. And one bearded man says that it was police-Muslim riots, in a sense, unless
and until the police force doesn’t grant freedom, the rioters can’t attack the minority Muslims or Hindus.

_Ghar jal gay… Satyanash!”_ came an anguished voice. “Pani lao!... Jaldi pani lao! “Screamed a bearded man in a lungi. A young girl helped her grandmother hobble as fast as she could. “Bacche ko nicaal!...” “Mere Munne ko aag se baccha de…”

The lanes were too narrow for a fire brigade. One by one houses were reduced to rubble feeble buckets of water hissed into steam. The rioters burned, the houses were badly damaged and people and children were badly injured. A small child was there in the house and the mother cried for help. This is one of the examples of what rioters have done with the minority Muslims. In the same way in Gujarat riots small children of nine months were burnt to ashes. A pregnant woman was walking, one of rioters, attacked her with a sword in her stomach and took out the child and threw the child in the air and cut the child into pieces.. a small baby who have not seen the world. Who was very well protected in the mother’s womb was cut into pieces. The basic question is what was the fault or sin or crime of an unborn baby? Women are raped, gang raped, husbands and brothers are been killed, what kind of secular country are we living in? Where are Hindu/Muslims, Christians or any other caste? There should be peace and harmony among them, they should realize, they are living in a secular India.

_Pervez first saw Munawar leading a group of boys who said they would not allow the body to be shifted. Unless the police, who were providing a hearse of Hindu, also provided ambulances to take injured Muslims to hospital. The demand seemed reasonable. But the police needed time to arrange an ambulance. So the funeral was delayed._

Munawar wanted the injured Muslims to be shifted to the hospital. They asked the police to send ambulances, as they have sent
ambulances for Hindus, they should send for Muslims also. Pervez said the police should be loyal to both the Hindus and Muslims. And they should be ready to help the injured people. ‘Industrialists have a stake in peace, concurred Farhad.’ The Tatas have been advocating a free market but after the riots no foreigner wants to step into India, leave alone invest here...’ Besides that, it’s gusty to call rioter ‘hooligans,’ ‘marauding mobs in the middle of all the violence. It was a statesman like statement.’ 155

The Tata’s are the most respected businessmen in the country. They always try to contribute to the economy and development of the country.

“They can better understand the loss which the country faces.’ We Parsis should keep out of this Hindu-Muslim business.” She repeated for hundred times. “How did Switzerland remain safe when Europe went up in flames? By remaining neutral.”

“Only cowards and opportunists remain neutral in a crises,” retorted Darius, and Pervez sensed a widening wedge between her brother and his wife. 156

Pestonji repeatedly criticizes the Parsis for living out of the good/bad situation. For Pestonji any riot is a riot and Parsis should help and support the victims. The one who faces the problems due to violence should be protected and there should be equal security given to every one. ‘She had worn her Parsi identity lightly. Till neutrality, became the quick and for ethics.’ Siddharth started silently at the ceiling ‘Good Hindus misguided by self-serving zealots.’ Pestonji highlights the Parsi nature of neutrality and their aloofness from the whole situation.

“There is only one God and his name is Allah.” Fine replied Pervez. “we can still sing the song with ‘O Lord ‘ as Asha was singing earlier. Or Hindus can sing. ‘He Bhagwan’ and Muslims respond with ‘O Allah as they jointly ask for peace. 157
Pervez and the group jointly pray for all the Muslims, Hindus and Christians of the world. They pray for the ‘suffering people all over the world whether they are in America or bonded labourers in China or riot victims in India. Each turn to the God of their culture.’ And even in peace committee/meeting the Hindus raised objection of saying ‘O Allah, the Muslims raise objection on singing ‘Hey Bhagwan’ and the Parsi raised objection on saying ‘O Lord.’ So, the better solution was to ask each community to recite the name of their God according to their religion. Once again Pestonji highlights the concept of secularism and if someone wants to maintain peace among these communities then the only solution to it is secularism. She says, ‘people are crying my Lord….Shanti do…. He Bhagwan, O Allah shanti do….’

Though the novel is written with the idea of depicting Hindu Muslims enmity during the riots and the hatred that Hindus have towards Muslims… the attention of the readers is attracted towards love between Fred and Pervez and affair of Pervez with Pawan. When the story ends Pervez is settled with a different kind of life, where she devotes her full time for social work. She completes her M. A. and gets the best of both the worlds. Love from Pawan and some peace by doing social work. Fred writes a letter and tries to call her back to Goa. But she resists going back and doesn’t reply to his letters as she knows too well what a roving eye her ex-husband had for women and can never improve. Pestonji resists against all set norms by the so called communities. If there is peace then it’s good, but if tension prevails then these superstitions and blind faith should be removed with the help of reason. In fact Pestonji pleads that reason prevails over bias and prejudice.
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