CHAPTER 6

ARDESHIR VAKIL
Like most Parsee novelists, Vakil too gives graphic descriptions of various dishes specialised by the Parsees in *Beach Boy*. Cyrus, an adolescent brimming with enthusiasm, is fond of food, most of the time he eats and drinks outside, in the neighbours’ houses. He is regarded as a free boarder. He swallows the insults of Mrs. Krishnan very often. He admits:

*I considered these insults a fee one had to pay for eating their food, for demanding their friendship, for sleeping in their beds, partaking of their quarrels, sharing their holidays, walking their dogs, making love to them, even sharing in their dreams. Generosity is often spiked. Hospitality has its limits.*

However, Cyrus enjoys their reluctant benevolence since he receives there what he fails to get at home - attention. He refers to the last supper of Jesus and says of his neighbours.

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Cyrus thus enjoys several ‘guilt-ridden’ meals. He draws a contrast between his own family which is in doldrums and the neighbours like the Krishnan’s in whose existence there is order and stability.

In *Beach Boy*, Vakil employs first person narration. Cyrus is the narrator and also a participant in the proceedings. He is both an insider and outsider: an insider in the Parsee community, he tells about the Parsee cuisine, customs and westernized social life of the community. As an outsider, he observes with detachment the life of non-Parsecs like the Krishnans and the Maharani. By employing a single narrative voice, Vakil
follows the tradition already set by Bapsi Sidhwa in *Ice-Candy-Man* and Kanga in *Trying to Grow*.

The Parsi novelists in ‘English have made a noteworthy contribution to the canon of postcolonial fiction. They generally fall into two categories: stay-at-home writers and expatriates. B.K. Karanjia and Dina Mehta are stay-at-home Parsis who deal with westernized Parsi life whereas Farrukh Dhondy, Firdaus Kanga, Rohinton Mistry and Ardashir Vakil are expatriate writers. Bapsi Sidhwa’s position is singular among Parsi writers in that she divides her time between Pakistan and America. In her there is no conflict what-so-ever, which is perceptible, explicitly or implicitly, in most expatriate writers.

Though Rohinton Mistry (Canada), Boman Desai (America) Kanga, Dhondy and Ardashir Vakil (Britain) are expatriate writers, they continue to write about Indian life with their essentially Indian sensibility. At the same time, their works have a distinctive ethnic character to give them an identity of their own. In his first novel, *Trying to Grow*, Kanga does to depict expatriate experience. The novel is set in India; the action revolves round Brit, a thoroughly westernized invalid Parsi boy in Bombay whose quest for identity is, at the same time, a passionate struggle to grow, emotionally and psychologically, though there is virtually no growth at the physical level. Like-wise Mistry, now settled in Canada, writes about ‘politics’ in India in *Such a Long Journey*, the victim of which is an innocent Parsi. The local colour in the narrative adds to the genuineness of Mistry’s account. Vakil too gives expression to the juvenile experiences of a Parsi boy in Bombay whose zest for life is typical of the marginalized community of the Parsis.

Kai Nicholson, in his discussion of expatriate sensibility in Commonwealth fiction, raises a point: “However, Mistry’s Indian world will stop growing unless he returns and plunges back into Bombay’s hybrid culture. Of course, he could continue to write in the present vein, but after a
while, the vividness of his world can start fading and imagination will replace realism.” Nicholson, however, does not discount the power and beauty of Mistry’s imagination. His argument is that Mistry’s imagination will be frozen to his time in India, since both *Such a Long Journey* and *Tales from Firozsha Baag* are full of documentation. Roshan Shahani observes: “Distance has given the author a certain lucidity of thought and clarity of vision, tinged with nostalgia though it might be. It permits him to perceive certain ‘home truths’ about his old home and his people, a fact which sometimes eludes those too close to home.” Thus Shahani’s argument highlights the advantages of expatriation. Nicholson focuses on the adverse affects of expatriation whereas Shahani regards expatriation as a creative source. What Nicholson and Sahani say of expatriate writes like Mistry holds water in the case of Vakil as well.

*Beach Boy* is a novel of education in the tradition of *Ice-Candy-Man* and *Trying to Grow*. The subject of a novel of education, according to M.H. Abrams, is the development of the protagonist’s mind and character, in the passage from childhood through varied experiences and often through a spiritual crisis into maturity and the recognition of his or her identity and role in the world.

*Beach Boy* is a rites-of-passage tale. Cyrus Readymoney, the central consciousness, is obsessed with films, food and sex. A young boy from the Parsi elite of Bombay, Cyrus is on the brink of adolescence. The narrative records his passage to self-hood. The ethnic identity of the protagonist is established in the very beginning:

"We are Zoroastrians ... We pray at agiryars ... temples where the same flame has been kept burnt for hundreds of years – we offer up our dead to the vultures at the top of Malabar till in huge stadium-sized wells called the Towers of Silence. We come from Iran, even though my grandmother hates to admit it."
Cyrus, like Brit, is detached and his stance is that of an outsider which is typical of westernized Parsis. He is indifferent to religious faith and the ritualistic aspects of Zorastrianism.

Cyrus lives in a juvenile world of pleasures and sorrows. What sustains his existence is fantasy. He immensely enjoys films since they provide an escape route from bitter realities of domestic life. The dream world of films often crosses over into his real life. He says: “this world, the world on our doorstep, the world on the street, the world on the hundreds of billboard advertisements around the city was as alien and as repellant as the underworld of rats in the sewers of the city.”

Films thus constitute an illusion, which, at least for Cyrus, is life sustaining. At the theatre, he tries to make a ball. He says to himself after his failed attempt: “But there was some-thing in the process of making that ball that I never forgot an acknowledgement, perhaps, of the futility of human endeavour.” Though he is too young to understand the implications of his own gesture, Cyrus begins to perceive the dichotomy between the ideal and the real. His experience at the shooting of Dev Anand’s film Heera Panna is an eye-opener: “Going to see a picture is so much better than all this shooting nonsense. It was the opposite kind of experience.”

Ennui is the problem of westernized Parsis in the postcolonial period. Cyrus’s passion for films and food is an adolescent’s quest for pleasure.

Minoo, Cyrus’s father, and Mr. Krishnan, their Malayali neighbour, are drawn in contrast. Mr. Krishnan is a simple and industrious man whereas Minoo is rich and aristocratic. Yet there is no organization in his life; he misses his flights, comes late to marriage, and is unpunctual. Cyrus records in his diary one day: “The Krishnans’ existence is happily circumscribed. I like the routine in their lives the order it offers, as compared to the chaotic freedoms of my own home.” When he finds himself alone, Cyrus unlocks his heart to himself. His dreams and fantasies do not
sustain him for long, emotionally. He wants something to cling to; hence his attachment with the Krishnans.

His father’s affair with an air hostess sets the cat among the pigeons. In vengeance Mehroo, his mother, starts a liaison with a prosperous man. Ten years of successful marriage thus comes to an end with his father’s betrayal. After the separation of his parents, he remarks: “My life too had been transformed. My parents had split up.”

Thus nostalgia creeps into an otherwise buoyant life of Cyrus. The Krishnans, on the other hand, continue to live together happily. He receives from their family what he craves for at home—love and affection. Cyrus’s family lives in a glass house facing the sea. Vakil perhaps seems to suggest that it stands for the fragile and delicate status of the Parsis which they earned during the colonial period.

Cyrus is emotionally attached to his mother. The Oedipal urge in him is so intense that it leads to a crisis of loyalty in his being. He and his father are kindred souls. He says of the similarity: “There was something special between him and me. He recognised a similar vagabond, vulnerable spirit in his son, a recklessness rushing towards ruin.” He begins to understand his father’s misery, loneliness and frustration: “For years his past had lurked underground. Now it was beginning to claw its way to the surface. An old ugliness was dragging him down, forcing him to revisit his former lives.” Thus, Minoo, like Sam in Trying to Grow, is a failed romantic.

In Vakil’s Beach Boy too, Parsi women are portrayed as strong beings, holding the family together. Mehroo faces her husband’s death with courage. She reclaims her position of assurance and control in the family. Cyrus, who does not shed a single tear, realizes the need for crying: “And now I was beginning to feel the need to cry, not just for the world outside, but for myself to maintain my sanity, to be able to say something to
someone to be able to say something to myself.” Mehroo even fulfils her husband’s last wish – to sprinkle his ashes over the sea.

Like most adolescents, Cyrus is too eager to grow. At the same time, however, she is aware of his limitations: “That’s what I am like. I think of a good reason to do something and then I don’t do it.”

His fascination for the Maharani of Bharatnagar is typical of a growing boy. She is a mystery to many but he finds her accessible. He observes once: “this woman’s life represented a hidden world outside my own, a world in which I might play a part.” She displays genuine enthusiasm for his views. She, like Madame Manekshaw in *Trying to Grow*, makes him look at life from a different perspective. He admires her as she is the only person who treats him like an adult. The Maharani is a reminder of the Raj; her aristocratic life is out of tune with the realities of Indian life in the post-Independence context. It is she who, with her words of assurance, helps him to progress step by step in his journey to selfhood.

Like Brit in *Trying to Grow*, Cyrus too is impatient to do all things done by adults. He reads Kafka’s *Diaries*. His impatience is clearly perceptible:

Sometimes though, being the odd one out, the bad egg, the rotten apple, the black sheep or the white sheep, had its advantages. These became my focus of influence and power. The embarrassment of being on display turned into the egotism of showing off, of procuring things I wouldn’t otherwise be able to get, of proving myself worthy of recognition, especially by those older than me, while pretending to play the joker.

But Cyrus’s assessment of adults is precise. He muses:

It seemed to me that all these adults were after was tears and sadness. Toothling away at their hearts was a sadness of their own which they dare not admit to, a pain they could expiate only by
flogging someone. There was one lesson to be learnt by the victim: display the correct emotion at the right time. Say thank you when someone gives you a present, cry when you are beaten.

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In *Beach Boy* too, as in *Trying to Grow*, the conflict between Good and Evil is internalized. From a child who is at the mercy of the generous neighbours, Cyrus grows into a self-reliant being. His new-found confidence is reflected in the words of Maharani: “Never mind, Cyrus, you will survive. These things happen.” Maharani covertly refers to the set-backs, disappointments and heartburns which are part of adult life. Thus *Beach Boy* ends on a note of affirmation with Cyrus adapting himself to the new clime which is the result of his father’s death.
References


