

Anglicised Minority

Interview with Meher Pestonji

Meher Pestonji is author of several books and plays. Her short story *Outsiders* is part of the anthology *Emerging India* (Diesterweg 2007). Thomas Gugler met Meher Pestonji's in Colaba, India after the performance of the play *Feeding Crows* for the *kitab-festival* at the Max Müller Bhavan (Goethe-Institut) in Mumbai on 22 February 2008.

Thomas K. Gugler: Your first book was *Mixed Marriage* (1999). What was the main point you wanted to make?

Meher Pestonji: Yes, my first book was *Mixed Marriage and other Parsi Stories*, in which I look at present day Parsis' in a rather critical light. After 1,300 years in India we have still not completely assimilated and to me that has been problematic.

TKG: Problematic in what sense?

MP: It has been a problem in the sense that it could have been a different development. During the 300 years of British rule – that's the time that the Parsis became what you call "Americanised", but it would be more correct to say "Anglicised" – they were favoured by the British, partly because they were fair skinned as compared to the indigenous population and had a reputation for being honest in their business dealings. They were also among the first local communities to take advantage of Western education. As a result of which, before independence, the Parsis accumulated a lot of money during the British raj. For the British they were a very much preferred community, so that the community was loth to support the national movement. The majority of the community was not in favour of independence.

TKG: From your play *Feeding Crows* I understand that the Parsi community is being currently challenged on two fronts: globalisation and modernisation.

MP: I would say there are two crises for the community. One is how to contemporise their religious rituals. This has been discussed in the play. The second issue facing the community is how to survive as a community. Nowadays there are less than a hundred thousand Parsis worldwide. So even UNESCO has put us on a list and called us an endangered religion. And a large



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The Parsi author Meher Pestonji

percentage of the Parsi population is older than 60. So this is one challenge faced by the community. Another debate within the community is whether converts or outsiders should be accepted into the community? Or should at least the children of mixed couples be allowed into the community. If one partner is a Parsi, the child is accepted as a Parsi only if the father is a Parsi, but if the mother is a Parsi, the child will not be allowed into the Parsi community. Which I find crazy, because at least you know who the mother of a child is for sure, but you cannot always be sure about the father.

TKG: You used a lot of different languages in the play, besides English I noticed Hindi, Marathi, and Parsi – are there any more?

MP: Yes, Hindi, Parsi-Gujerati, and Marathi. The script was written in English, but the actors brought in the other languages. I can make use of Hindi and Parsi-Gujarati but not Marathi.

TKG: You play around a lot with the different positions of liberals and traditionalists. Do you consider yourself a religious rebel?

MP: My own religious background is very mixed. My parents separated when I was eight months old. My mother's side of the family came with a lot of traditional religious heritage, my uncle was the president of the Anjuman. I was brought up by my uncle and aunt, who were childless. They had a very strong influence on me. When I was around eleven, my grandfather died and my mother became a Christian. She became a Christian Scientist and I was dutifully taken to Sunday School. When

¹ Parsis: They are descendants of a group of Zoroastrians who fled to India from Persia during the Muslim persecutions of the 7th and 8th centuries. Most of them settled in Mumbai where they still have their largest community.

I became an adolescent, my friends went to jam sessions on Sunday morning, while I was expected to go to Sunday School. Of course, I didn't like it, so I stopped going. I have been a kind of agnostic for many years. And when I came back to religion, it was a completely different path. I have been very close to Bhagavad-gita, I am close to Ganesha, so it's a different path I have taken. It's not a question of traditional or conservative.

TKG: Religious plurality in India has often been conflict-ridden and also in your play we see a conflict between Parsi and Hindu neighbours. Was this intended to be a religious conflict?

MP: This is not a religious conflict; it's a conflict between communities. It may have its roots in religion, but being vegetarian or non-veg is more a community issue.

TKG: Considering that you focus on the conflict between the American and Indian part of the Parsi Family, I wonder if you have witnessed such conflicts in your own life?

MP: After Independence many Parsis left India. They went to the UK, USA, Canada and Australia. I wanted to portray a character, who is liberal, visibly liberal and coming from a country, in which Parsis don't follow the *dokhma*-system. In the USA Parsis are buried like anyone else². He is not from within the community, because he doesn't live here.

TKG: What about your own funeral? Do you want to be cremated?

MP: In my family everyone was cremated. My mother was, my uncle, my cousin, everyone was, and I made it very clear that I want to be cremated.

The original interview has been slightly altered and edited by Rudolph F. Rau. M.A., Schorndorf, German

Selected Bibliography:

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² ...are buried like anyone else: The religion of the Parsis requires that the dead are left in a "tower of silence," which is open at the top to allow vultures to devour the corpse. Because of a lack of vultures the corpses have been left to rot, thus causing protests from neighbouring residents. It is now an issue among the Parsis as to whether to go with the times and allow normal burials or cremations. Ms Pestonji deals with this issue in her play *Feeding Crows*.