



AND SOME TAKE A LOVER

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INTRODUCTION

Dina Mehta is a well-known name in the contemporary literary circles. Unlike most of the other prominent Parsi writers, who have based themselves in the West, Dina Mehta has chosen to stay in India and pursue her literary career. She has authored two novels – *And Some Take A Lover* and *Mila In Love*. . Dina Mehta is an accomplished author who successfully raises the issues of Parsi life in her novels. The present chapter takes up her novel – *And Some Take A Lover* for study. Dina Mehta portrays the divergent attitudes within the Parsi community about aligning themselves via the emerging nation state during the period just before the independence.

DESCRIPTION

And Some Take A Lover is an engrossing novel about a Parsi family caught up in a conflict of clashing loyalties in the backdrop of Indian freedom struggle. Set in Bombay during the nineteen forties, the novel depicts the identity struggle of Roshni Wadia, who is torn between her inclination towards Mahatma Gandhi's *swadeshi* and *satyagraha* movements during the Quit India Movement and the counter pull of her westernised family and Parsi friends. Mehta dexterously interweaves the personal and social identity struggle through the person of Roshni. She knits in the political debates and the anxieties faced by the Parsi community during the period.

H. A. Newell remarks,

“Among the many strange people who accepted the Company's offer of hospitality none was more welcome than the Parsi and none became so completely identified with the fortunes of the city”¹ (Luhmann 86).

Dina Mehta remarks in *And Some Take A Lover*:

“The Parsee way of life was the most westernised in India. More than the Anglo -Indians they could afford the tastes, the standards, the luxuries introduced by the alien rulers”² (188).

The novel provides ample evidence of the adulation of the British by the Parsis during the colonial times. Mithu Bharucha hosts a dinner party at her house and among the guests is an Englishman. Mithu wears triumphant air during the dinner. She feels the mere presence of the “white sahib”³ (11) at her party has made it momentous. She carries the notion in her mind that,

“Anyone in this country would be dazzled to accept an invitation which carried with it the supreme distinction of sitting down to dinner with an Englishman”⁴ (11).

Dina Mehta, thus, exposes the ludicrousness of this assumed instance by Mithu to appear Westernised. Mehta's description of Mithu's house also brings out the incongruity of this effort to mimic the British. It was

“Grand..in a somewhat indeterminate fashion, with no Eastern colours in evidence in its décor, but not quite Western either despite Venetian glass vases, Dresden shepherdesses, and its Victorian mass and solidity”⁵(14)

This is symbolic of the condition of the Parsi community in India. They chose not to be like the Indians and fashioned their life after the British which could never be complete and authentic. The result is a feeble imitation, a transparent mask through which their paradoxical existence is plainly visible. This Anglicization and mindless copying of the British way of life was limited not only to a few individuals but widespread among the Parsis. Mehta presents examples of Coomi Sethna, Aban Kothavala and others to drive home her point. Even Roshni shared this peculiarity with her community members:

“She spoke English better than her adopted mother-tongue Gujarati. She even thought in English. She did not know Persian, the language of her ancestors. Her second language in school and college had been French. She did not know a word of Avesta, in which her prayers were written. She knew more about Christianity than of her own religion. Her home too, was patterned on the Western style. Her meals were served at a table with knife, fork, napkin and all the other adjuncts. The pictures that framed her walls were reproductions of Western masters. A piano stood in the living - room.”⁶(188)

T. M. Luhrmann notes that,

“A cluster of self-attributes became established in the Parsi literature”. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth century which was “transformed into a powerful political argument for community superiority and difference from other Indians.”⁷(96)

Parsis were repeatedly described as progressive, truthful, rational, cultured, refined and charitable. This fostered a prejudicial attitude among the Parsis towards other Indian.

And Some Take A Lover Pirojabai presents her bias towards the Hindus. She views them as uncultured and unscrupulous:

“The Hindus wore *dhotis*; he turned his world into a vast spittoon by ejecting streams of betel juice on walls, staircases, roads, pavements; his bathrooms stank of urine and kitchens of *heeng*; he was dishonest in his business practices”⁸(38).

Dina Mehta's ***And Some Take A Lover*** charts the turmoil of one such person caught up in the vortex of divergent pulls during the Quit India Movement. Roshni Wadia is a young Parsi girl from a middle-class Parsi family. She supports the nationalist cause and inclines herself towards the Indian freedom struggle though her family and friends within the community are not appreciative of it.

Roshni is initially drawn towards the nationalist movement as a student at Elphinstone college. She is enamoured with a fellow student Sudhir Mahipal who is a staunch nationalist.

Dina Mehta highlights the quintessential issue of identity and belonging faced by the Parsis. Deeply anglicized, the Parsis lead on their lives after the manner of the British. As the independence looked more and more imminent, there arose anxiety about their future

course of action in the light of the approaching independence. Rustom, a wealthy Parsi merchant, maintains that it is not difficult to see,

“How rootless they are? That they do not belong? He further takes up his stance about their position in India: “What has this country to offer us? What kind of cultural life? We Parsis are aliens here. And our days are numbered after the British leave”⁹ (18).

Against this social and political scenario of the pre-independence years, Roshni tries to resolve her identity crisis. For Roshni, personal identity is inextricably linked up with social identity. Though she empathizes with the nationalist cause, she is still held back by the expectations of her family and community as well as by her irresolution. While dressing up for her friend Sabrina’s birthday party, Roshni is in a dilemma over what to wear – should she wear the plain *khadi* or some elegant chiffon sari. During this sartorial predicament, switching between the two options, Roshni feels that her nationalism is a mere stance:

“She was merely acting a part for God’s sake. Modeling herself on the fine histrionic role she ought to be playing in the drama of her country’s resurgence. She was not truly selfless, or dedicated like Lajwanti. What inner resources did she have for the quiet, unspontaneous work of the *satyagrahi*? And what was the use of wearing khadi if she had not learnt the ideals for which it stood.”¹⁰ (109)

Even Sudhir questions Roshni’s sincerity about involving herself in the nationalist struggle. During one of their meetings, Roshni casually expresses her desire to work for the nationalist cause:

“I have half a mind to join it myself.”¹¹ (169)

Sudhir ignores her suggestion as he thinks she is not ready for it and her draping herself in khadi was just a,

“Role, complete with costume and dialogue.”¹² (170)

Sudhir feels that she assumes this role for his sake, to impress him and to be close to him. Though Sudhir also feels for Roshni, he articulates that he cannot pursue this thought further as it would distract him from his purpose:

“I have to be single-minded, free for this work. You know what it means – it’s the endless striving with self for – for clarity, for detachment and the balanced mind.”¹³ (177)

While Sudhir has this strength and balance of mind, Roshni is unable to think clearly because of her passion for Sudhir. So obsessed is she with Sudhir that she inextricably links up her priorities with Sudhir:

“So absorbed was she in her love that Sudhir seemed to govern her even from a distance. She made her plans, bought her clothes, accepted or rejected invitations, all in the light of whether Sudhir would approve or disapprove. She tried to read all the books he read. She subscribed to *Harijan* and read *Hind Namo* from cover to cover.”¹⁴ (186)

After a while, Sudhir decides to leave for a small town Sevagram to put into practice his Gandhian ideals. Roshni is extremely distressed by Sudhir’s departure. She felt so betrayed by Sudhir’s decision to leave that,

“For her the hysteria of nationalism had halted mid-stream in cynicism and, drained of all emotional content, she was left with this one longing: to get rid of the void at the centre being, at whatever cost”¹⁵ (20)

Coming out of the impassiveness triggered by the pangs of guilt caused by her fleeting liaison with Rustom, Roshni decides to take control of her life. In a letter to Sudhir, she lets him know her state of mind and her firm resolve she has made to take control of her life. Roshni is now,

“Determined to fashion her life according to her choice. For too long she had been like a driver who finds her machine directing itself, starting and stopping as it desired. But now she had taken a vital decision, she was ready to brave the ignorant spirit of prejudice...”¹⁶ (195)

She apprises him of her resolve to join him and work shoulder to shoulder in the nationalist struggle on the lines of the principles laid down by Gandhi. The writing of this letter serves the purpose “to assure her of her own worth”. She vows to fight against the bias of her family and community with respect to her decision to involve herself in the freedom struggle. At the same time the letter brings her “a kind of weary exhilaration”.

Her exhilaration, though, is short-lived. In his assiduous following of Gandhian principles, Sudhir marries a Harijan girl, Gauri. Roshni learns this from the nationalist journal *Hind Namō*. This is a definitive event in the life and identity struggle of Roshni. As a first reaction, she locks herself in her room and, further, in herself. However, she comes out of it soon as a changed individual. The willingness to be in control of her life expressed by Roshni in her letter to Sudhir now begins to materialize:

“It was as if a page of her had been silently turned, and the breath of its turning changed her. Her soul came of age and with this prodigious blossoming she ceased to be a child.”¹⁷ (200)

Roshni who is “facing the cross-roads, groping for the right answers” starts moving in the direction where she resolves that she will no longer be swayed by others expectations of her. In “*The Politics of Recognition*”, Charles Taylor asserts:

“We define our identity always in dialogue with, sometimes in struggle against, the things our significant others want to see in us.. we should strive to define ourselves on our own to the fullest extent possible, coming as best as we to understand.. and avoiding falling into.. dependent relationships. We need relationships to fulfill, but not to define, ourselves.”¹⁸ (32-33)

Towards the end of the novel, Roshni takes a decisive step towards resolving the conflict that had been plaguing her in the past. In the past she had been the “in-between, the half-way person” tugged in opposite directions by the call of her inner voice on the one hand and familial and community expectations on the other. Douglas Archer sends her Sudhir’s journal. Sudhir’s wife had given it to Madhav who sent it to Douglas. After going through the journal in which Sudhir had entered his work and experiences as a *satyagrahi* in some remote village, Roshni is moved by Sudhir’s selfless devotion to the path enunciated by Mahatma Gandhi. She understands half measures are not good enough and she has to commit herself totally and unquestionably to the nation. Finally her “eyes did see ... where would her feet take her”. She rejects Rustom’s invitation to accompany him to England and his offer of “love, security, status, travel, education”.

The novel also implicitly takes up the issue of inter-faith marriage. Roshni is in love with Sudhir, a Hindu, and even wants to marry him. However, she does not disclose her intentions to her family as Sudhir, deeply involved in the nationalistic cause, tells Roshni that though he loves her, he is unable to reciprocate as thinking about love and marriage would distract him from his purpose.

To sum up, Roshni's efforts at understanding her position are symbolic of her quest for identity. She feels affinity for the nation and, at the same time, she is pulled in a different direction by her familial and community expectations. The majority of her community members are engrossed in themselves and remain uninvolved in the freedom struggle going on around them. They are content to pursue their cocooned existence. Roshni is contrasted with Mithu and Jer who are happy leading a complacent domestic life without bothering about the larger events at the national level. Roshni, on the other hand, is fired by the ideals which her English education at Elhpinstone College equipped her with.

Roshni involves herself in the nationalist movement much to the chagrin of her family members who do not approve of it. In addition to this opposition, she finds a resistance within herself resulting from her Westernized upbringing. This binds her in a dilemma about how to proceed further. While Sudhir involves himself completely in the nationalist cause and identifies himself with the dispossessed, Roshni is unable to do so because of the insular nature of the community in which she had been brought up. She realizes that,

“Between these people and her was a chasm as wide as it was deep, and she did not have even a common language with which to bridge it”¹⁹ (191 -92)

The novel presents her struggle to reconcile these antipodal influences. Through a retrospective gaze, Dina Mehta suggests that Parsis like Roshni did the right thing to go beyond the myopic vision of isolating themselves as a community, and to identify themselves with the emerging nation-state.

As, the novel is set in city of Bombay, the different strands of western civilization of that time of Bombay during freedom struggle are beautifully interwoven by the novelist. Dina Mehta gives the picture of Parsi community living during freedom struggle in Bombay and the villages where Gandhian movement occupied centre stages.

Work Cited

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