

Memory, History and Fiction in Keki Daruwalla's *Ancestral Affairs*

Sib Sankar Majumder

Abstract

Although the Partition crisis turned out to be a tussle for power primarily between the Hindus and the Muslims, the Parsee community also got entangled in the chaotic situations. The Parsees were not directly involved in the torture and the trauma still it had a calamitous impact on the collective psyche of the Parsi community in the subcontinent. By and large the Parsis maintained an indifferent attitude towards the political fallout Partition since it had very little say on the issue of transfer of power. Patrick H. Hutton summarizes the situation for the Parsis by saying that "one might say, there are two moments of history: one that universalizes and homogenizes the past within a single interpretative pattern; the other that diversifies the past into a myriad of particular traditions" (Hutton 101). Through a reading of Keki Daruwalla's *Ancestral Affairs* based on the binary tropes proposed by Hutton I would offer certain observations on the interplay of memory and history in Partition experience viv-a-vis the the Parsi community.

Keywords: Displacement; Exile; Historiography; Home; Partition.

Ancestral Affairs (2015), Keki Daruwalla's third and the latest novel is based on the Partition of India and the birth of two new nations in South Asia. *Ancestral Affairs* can be read at different levels on account of its complex narrative structure and story line. On the one hand the fictional account has given an imaginative form to the history of the Indian subcontinent and on the other hand it provides a commentary on the destruction of the subcontinent's composite cultural ethos because of Partition. Daruwalla's novel explores the notion of India's Partition period as having a single history by inviting the readers to question the official history of the Partition of Indian subcontinent. Through his fictional account Daruwalla

provokes his readers to perceive the fact that certain events associated with the Partition of Indian subcontinent are also 'fiction' fomented and manipulated by the powerful political elites. Advocating the textuality of history, Daruwalla foregrounds the Parsee perspective on the Partition of India. The family of Saam Bharucha can be viewed as an extended metaphor of the plurality of history. The above mentioned observations can be rightly justified by the following extract from the narrative. To illustrate, the discussions on the history and political upheavals between Sydney Barnes and Saam Bharucha ends with Bharucha claiming:

And history has lot to do with our troubles. Everything is mottled with history. And it is playing a pretty dirty role, if you ask me. One side thinks they have had enough of the other- they can't forget a thousand- year- old yoke or servitude, call it what you will. The Muslims can't forget they were conquerors of sorts. Each side thinks the other is the devil (Daruwalla 25).

The official discourse on Partition of the Indian subcontinent, thus far, has been written by historians from dominant communities like the English (Europeans), Hindus and Muslims who were the primary stakeholders in the 'great game' and as a result of this perspective from the minority communities like Parsees and Buddhists remained largely unexplored. However, it would be erroneous to assume that these communities maintained a neutral position during the confusion and the apocalyptic situation leading to Partition. When the socio- political scenario of India during the Partition was filled with hunger for power between the Hindus, the Muslims and the princely states, there was also the minority communities like the Parsees which had limited avenues to narrativize its history. Saam Bharucha's son Rohinton was thrown out of medical college as he was accused of murdering his friend Damodar Pande. Unable to complete his studies in medical college, Rohinton decided to pursue a career in journalism where also he failed miserably. Rohinton reveals the idea that the struggle for India's independence or Partition had affected him adversely. He had his own personal history to narrate. Therefore, he says, "My mother tells me that 1947 had impacted me badly. It changed my life. She's wrong. It was perhaps my stint at Lawrence College Murree- Gora Gully, as people used to call it, the by- lane of the Whites- which had an impact, possibly" (Daruwalla 72).

Saam Bharucha, the protagonist of Daruwalla's *Ancestral Affairs* acts as a moderator between the dominion of India, Pakistan and the princely states. In the midst of all the confusion and the tussle for power, the read-

ers can also sense an air of disinterestedness and reluctance prevailing within the Parsees as the afflictions sustained by the Parsees were completely overlooked by the other dominant communities. The anxiety of being 'unhomed' surfaces rather prominently in *Ancestral Affairs* as it mingles history with fiction. The history of India as a nation is problematized with personal histories and the readers are provided a rather personalized representation of the history of Partition through the dilemmas, delusions and disenchantments of the various characters in the novel. Daruwalla attains this feat by synchronizing the national history with the domestic lives of the Parsee family of Saam Bharucha, through juxtaposing public events against private lives. The historical events pose as a constant threat to personal security and in this struggle the identity markers of 'home' get diluted. The official history of Partition overshadows individual trauma. In an interesting passage in the novel Saam's fragmented psychological state of mind is posited against a national calamity in order to highlight the superfluity of personal tragedies:

Take your spyglass and look outwards. Don't get bogged down in your petty dreams. The times are such that individuals and their angst would get dwarfed, overrun by events. In the second week of January 1947, I could already sense the advance of the bulldozer of history (Daruwalla 2).

The point that Daruwalla wants his readers to perceive through his narrative is that the year 1947 is not only about Partition and the socio-political events related to it. 1947, like any other ordinary year in human history also comprised of individual affairs and family matters which escaped the notice of historians. Individual trauma and experiences were pushed to the peripheries making Partition discourse pretty homogeneous in nature. Therefore, through the fictional account Daruwalla is advocating the heterogeneity of history and historical events. The historical events of 1947 can also be viewed as the saga of the displaced as millions were rendered homeless. As has already been discussed in the previous chapters the Parsees were caught in a situation which threatened multiple dislocations. Such ideas constantly thread through *Ancestral Affairs*. There is a significant incident in the narrative where the Dewan of Junagarh clarifies to His Royal Highness Mahabat Khanji the difficulties of his choice to accede to Pakistan. When Saam Bharucha, being the moderator, could not accept the decision and deemed it illogical, the Dewan not paying heed to Bharucha's opinions said, "Bharucha, I know your views and am certain that this will be distasteful to you. But you are the right man to do it, and in times like these, we can't be too concerned about individual feelings. That

way we could never get things done" (Daruwalla 62). Through such situations and dialogues *Ancestral Affairs* exposes the 'fictionality' and 'constructedness' which is the nature of Partition discourse. Saam Bharucha being a member of the minority community narrates his side of the story during the Partition fiasco and debunks the master narrative. Therefore, when the Indian subcontinent was writhing under the pain of the Partition trauma Zarine Bharucha was undergoing the pain of her husband's extra-marital affair with Mrs. Claire Barnes. These accounts from the lives of ordinary Parsees lead a reader to develop the impression that history of the Partition is not merely about Hindu-Muslim riots brutalizing the lives of common people.

Memory plays a significant role in isolating painful accounts of traumatic events of Partition from a grand historical discourse and situating such experiences on the lives of common human beings. The case of Saam Bharucha in *Ancestral Affairs* can be singled out as an interesting specimen of this phenomenon. He has been introduced as "an expert from Bombay, someone neutral and frank" who is entrusted to take care of the interest of the princely state of Junagarh, gradually discovers with a growing sense of anxiety that his community is being increasingly alienated from the debates regarding the geographical division and the socio-political scenario of the Indian subcontinent" (Daruwalla 4). His uncertain state of mind replicates the precarious condition of his community:

No one has any opinion on how things will shape out. You can't have any opinion when everything is so uncertain. Will the British leave at all? What's going to happen to Jinnah and his Pakistan? Is he going to get his slice of the roast? Are we moving into a confederation of sorts? Or will there be two dominion states with one single viceroy lording it over Delhi, where else? Or will there be three dominions- Hindu, Muslim and princely? There can be no fruitful discussion if no one knows the basic shape this land-mass would be moulded into (Daruwalla 10).

From Saam's position as an interlocutor in the great imperial game, one may derive a wrong impression that in most political matters and in matters of statehood Parsees remained a silent bystander but there are numerous other instances in the novel which objectify the suffering of the Parsees. For example, Zarine's (the wife of Saam Bharucha) anxiety over her son Rohinton's safety reaches hysteric proportions in the narrative after she sends her son to study in Murree. Rohinton's school days brings regular chaotic visions of "gun-slinging Pathans to her mind" (Daruwalla

14). The 'playful engagement' with history in *Ancestral Affairs* can also be witnessed in Daruwalla's preoccupation with 'memory'. In this novel Daruwalla has gone beyond the limits of historical discourse and tried to acknowledge the contribution of memory in the formation of an alternative historiography of the Parsee community. *Ancestral Affairs* is a multi-dimensional work and thus can be interpreted at different levels. While investigating the condition of perennial displacement of the ethnic minority Parsee community this chapter intends to discuss the ways in which memory is employed in the historical narrative. Therefore, this fictional account can also be viewed as an alternative historiography through memory. Hutton argues that historical events can be contested through the contours of memory; historical truths can be questioned through the 'memory of one's own heritage' (95). To discover the diversity of history, historians should go 'beyond the political terrain that had long been their primary domain' (95). He believes that memory can act as a window to the past illuminating the heterogeneous nature of history. It has power to infiltrate history without getting overwhelmed by the authoritative nature of historical enquiry, to 'provide access to hidden domains of the past long since obliterated by the official version of history proffered for public consumption' (318).

Hayden White, the postmodern historian, is of the opinion that the events of the past are brought to the readers in a certain form derived from literature because history is documented through language. Therefore, it can be said that if language is provisional then history can also be subjected to revision and observational controls. For White history is basically 'verbal fiction' and it has more connections with literature than the sciences. Illuminating the constructed nature of history and historiography, White observes:

One of the good marks of a good professional historian is the consistency with which he reminds his readers of the purely provisional nature of his characterizations of events, agents and agencies found in the always incomplete historical record. Nor is it to say that literary theorists have *never* studied the structure of historical narratives. But in general there has been a reluctance to consider historical narratives as what they most manifestly are: verbal fictions, the contents of which are as much *invented as found* and the forms of which have more in common with their counterparts in literature than they have with those in the sciences (White 82).

White contests the reader's notion of history as not being creative in nature. In his opinion the form in which historical facts comes down to the readers is in the form of a story and therefore, it can be argued that history is fictitious in nature (it is to be noted that the 'form' is fictive in nature and not the historical 'facts'). Readers do not question historical narratives as they are canonical in nature and there lies the paradox. The more readers know history the more they get distanced from it as historical facts comes down to its readers in a number of narratives which make it problematic to generalize history. Such arguments and observations provoke us to be skeptical with the authoritative nature of historical discourse.

Referring to the historian R.G. Collingwood, Hayden White discusses the former's concept of "the constructive imagination" of a historian (White 83). Collingwood also advocates a similar viewpoint that historical events have value neutral. He observes that historical events are congeries of "facts" which "in their unprocessed form, made no sense at all" (83). The historical events or facts will remain incomplete and fragmented unless the historian takes the help of a structure to construct the events into a plausible story and offer it for public consumption. To configure the historical facts into a story the historian will have to take the help of culturally accepted "pre-generic plot structures" (tragedy, comedy, romance etc.) available to the readers. While illuminating R.G. Collingwood, White also adds to his ideas and observes that the historical situations or events are not intrinsically tragic or comic in nature. The readers take the events as tragic or comic because it is part of their literary heritage. Also Hayden White throws light on the historian privileging one historical event over the other. The historical narrative that is offered for public consumption depends on the stress the historians puts on certain historical events or facts and eclipse the others. Hayden White in his critical essay observes:

What Collingwood failed to see was that no given set of casually recorded historical events can in itself constitute a story; the most it might offer to the historian are story *elements*. The events are *made* into a story by the suppression or subordination of certain of them and the highlighting of others, by characterization, motif repetition, variation of tone and point of view, alternative descriptive strategies, and the like- in short, all of the techniques that we would normally expect to find in the emplotment of a novel or a play (White 84).

The manner in which historians give shape to the historical facts by suppressing some and highlighting others can be paralleled with the way a

creative writer engages with his task. In the same token, Keki Daruwalla's *Ancestral Affairs* can be termed a creative historical retelling of the Partition events highlighting the predicament of the ethnic minority Parsee community during the partition of the Indian subcontinent. As discussed in the Introduction, after their persecution from their homeland and their subsequent resettlement in India, the Parsees mingled well with the mainstream communities of the foreign land. They adopted and adapted to the distinct socio-cultural framework of their host country and also engaged themselves in the politics of the nation. Eventually they became nation-builders and also contributed to the economy of the nation (Bharucha 43). Although they were raised to the status of the 'elites' during the British rule in India, they eventually turned out to be the grave diggers of British colonialism in the Indian subcontinent. But owing to the endogamous nature of their community and their minuscule population index the Parsees were identified as an ethnic minority in India and the other major communities were not much aware of this unique community and consequently they were edged out of the official rhetoric of Partition history. It is subtly represented in Keki Daruwalla's fictional account when Rohinton as the narrator introduces the Parsee Feroza to the readers. Rohinton says:

I had a Parsee girl in class. Nothing unusual – but, in Kanpur, it was. Kanpur and Benares wouldn't know Parsees from polyester, if you ask me. Allahabad would, though, all because of that Feroze Gandhi, whom now the Jan Sangh wants to brand as Muslim. If you are a micro-community, the vibes are quite different when you run into a fellow crab-eater (Daruwalla 108).

Daruwalla's narrative approaches the historical events of the infamous Jallianwalla Bagh massacre with a completely different angle which is also surprisingly personal in nature. When Saam Bharucha asks about his wife Zariné's genealogy to his uncle Kavarana Kaka, the latter begins the story of a Parsee family torn apart. Through the contours of his memory, Kavarana Kaka narrates the life of the brothers Navroz and Neville Dubash and how Nevilles's relationship with his brother Navroz suffered. The uncle also narrates the rumour of Neville's wife Manizeh's extra-marital affair with the widower Siavak Billimoria. The rumour is spread by Navroz.

Ancestral Affairs offers a self-conscious fictional alternative to the events of the Jallianwala Bagh massacre. After facing heavy loss in his business Navroz slips into depression and starts writing letters every week in a local newspaper. The alternative story of the infamous event is the outcome of one of his letters. As Kavarana Kaka narrates:

He started writing letters every week to the *Jam-e-Jamshed*, the Parsee daily newspaper, which published them dutifully, till the time the Jallianwala Bagh massacre took place- four hundred killed and a good twelve hundred injured in the monstrous firing. Navroz came out with the theory that General Dyer was in love with a Parsee dame (unnamed), who, in turn, was in love with a Sikh. That particular Sikh was present at Jallianwala Bagh that fatal morning, so our lover boy Dyer takes his canons and machine guns in and lets go. This letter got thrown in the dustbin (Daruwalla 187).

'Homelessness' and the fear of being 'unhomed' permeates through the textual layers of *Ancestral Affairs*. As the narrative progresses readers can witness how a Parsee family engages itself in the search for its ancestral familial connections and roots. With complicated territorial identifications and no possibility of physically returning to their ancestral origins, the Parsee household of the narrative try to discover lost family ties and a community feeling. To illustrate, Saam Bharucha inquisitiveness to trace his wife Zarine's genealogy leads him to Kavarana Kaka who, through the annals of his memory, narrates the story of the estranged Parsee household. Such ideas constantly thread through Keki Daruwalla narrative as the readers can perceive the fact that though the Parsees share a common history of diasporic dispersal from their ancestral land, the community no longer shares much emotional bonding among its members. Although there is always an attempt at integration, individual interests precede allegiances for community orientation. The ever widening rift between Neville and Navroz Dubash in *Ancestral Affairs* is a case in point. At the end of the novel Zarine looks completely confused regarding her family's genealogy when her distant relative Karl pays her a visit also to trace his lost family origins. As Lynne Briggs and others observe:

When the expectations and realities of migration do not match, the individuals involved can experience elevated levels of psychological distress. A sense of helplessness and hopelessness and loss of purpose can prevail which, when coupled with social isolation from extended and friends, can lead to existential distress and low mood and demoralization (Briggs et al.).

Throughout the novel family life and kinship issues have been scrutinized through the prism of migration and displacement theory. So, it becomes pertinent to delve into the concept of 'family' as it acts as a fulcrum for the migrant individual/community to survive in the host country. As so-

ciologists Lynne Briggs et al. in their research work on migration studies say, 'One of the key factors to successful resettlement is having a 'family' in the host country and dislocation from significant family members is a major stressor in its own right' (Lynne Briggs et al.). Therefore, the Parsee household of Saam Bharucha falls apart as his extra-marital affair completely destroys it. This has a strong effect on his son Rohinton as he has a blighted childhood and then transforms into a fragmented adult. During a moment of tragic nostalgia Rohinton remarks,

Did Dad and Mama ever feel ashamed for all the dissembling that went in front of me, I have often wondered. Dissembling for the sake of a child is not lying, I guess. There is one truth for adulthood and another for childhood (Daruwalla 147).

After investigating *Ancestral Affairs* through the prism of history and memory, one can conclude that the official rhetoric of history is an incomplete account of events and therefore, provisional and contingent in nature. After conducting the study incorporating the ideas of the two historians namely Hayden White and Patrick H. Hutton, my conclusion has been that historians and their process of writing history (historiography) are not beyond the process of speculation. As discussed in the third chapter of my dissertation there are a multiple narratives of the same historical facts and there is always the possibility of more interpretations. Keki Daruwalla has very effectively represented the complex nature of history and exposed the fact that history is heterogeneous in nature. A distinct historical event/fact may have different connotations for different people in accordance with the perspective of the beholder. It also needs to be mentioned that the creative writer's oeuvre does not or cannot replace the historical events but it only adds to the facts through re-narration of his/her fictional accounts. This further establishes the plurality of history. Keki Daruwalla, being a creative writer, contests the official version of history being homogeneous by establishing its fictitious nature.

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