CINEMA

Out of Focus

The Parsi's Bombay and the Parsi in Bombay cinema have been both oddly and inadequately rendered, argues **Sucheta Chakraborty**

Shirin Farhad Ki Toh Nikal Padi 2012

Shots of the Bombay sea frame Vijaya Mehta's *Pestonjee* (1988). The film opens with a middle-aged Pirojshah (Naseeruddin Shah) standing hunched on the beach, slowly stretching his arms to ease a painful back and irritably shooing away a curious little girl who had stopped to watch. The film closes with him, visibly more limber, ambling down the promenade and staring out at the water. The understanding that comes to him through the events that lie between these two bookending moments perhaps enables for him a symbolically less painful progression away from all the things that had held him back. These are also among the very few scenes in the film where the city beyond the closed interiors comes into view, rare moments of openness in a film that traps its characters within splendid, ageing, cloistered spaces that conversely isolate and separate.

Several Bombays have existed on the screen. There is the usually Hindu, sometimes Christian, middle-class Bombay of Basu Chatterjee's and Hrishikesh Mukherjee's films where characters find love and solutions to everyday struggles while navigating the city by local train and BEST buses and meeting at its iconic joints. Then there is the gangster's Bombay where visuals of high-rises, high-speed car chases, red-light districts and dimly lit roadside eateries make up the progressively darker visions of the city as in *Don*, *Satya*, *Vaastav* or the more recent *Sacred Games* television series. The city's murky networks of hustle and corruption tied to its dream-factory myths and tantalising promises of success are epitomised in films like *Slumdog Millionaire*. Many other such cinematic Bombays have intrigued, amused and enchanted audiences over the years. But one whose representation perhaps reflects its own marginal place within the national imagination is the Bombay of the Parsi.

"These [are] locations that are not usually seen on film," says screenwriter and photographer Sooni Taraporevala in one interview, speaking of her first directorial venture, *Little Zizou* (2008), which is set within the exclusive world of the Parsi *baug*. Despite the scope and variety of India's cinematic traditions, Bombay's film industry has for decades enjoyed a dominating influence over both production and representation across audiences, and has thoroughly mined its home city's unique and well-known geography and experiences for stories. It is strange then how little Parsi life has been presented in its films. While Bombay's cinema is integrally linked to the city, it is also surprisingly forgetful of its own history, one in which the Parsi community played a fundamental part, helping to build the infrastructure, industry and institutions that ensured its hold on modernity and, in considerable part, responsible for its famed cosmopolitan reputation.

In popular Indian cinema, Parsis, like most ethnic communities, have been reduced to caricatures, an instant recognisability favoured over a convincing portrayal. They appear as almost comical figures—meek, whimsical and quarrelsome, fussing over their vehicles, nostalgic about British ways, too easily pleased by a dish of dhansak and a game of cricket

Not that Parsi characters have not featured in Bombay cinema. There are several examples, from the romantically inclined Nausherji Bomanji Batliwala (Rajan Haksar), general manager of the Jackson Tolaram company in *Chhoti Si Baat* (1976), to the more memorable Dr Rustam Pavri (Kurush Deboo) in *Munna Bhai M.B.B.S* (2003). In popular Indian cinema and advertisements, however, Parsis, like most ethnic communities, have been reduced to caricatures, an instant recognisability favoured over a convincing portrayal. Parsis appear as almost comical figures—meek, whimsical and quarrelsome, fussing over their vehicles, nostalgic about British ways, too easily pleased by a dish of dhansak and a game of cricket. But they have rarely been the protagonists. In *Bombay Cinema: An Archive of the City*, Ranjani Mazumdar discusses how the popular hero of Hindi films is typically a North Indian figure and how, despite a range of linguistic and behavioural inflections, they have habitually presented a broad-based North Indian experience. This possibly explains why films about Parsi lives and stories generally lean into the conventions of parallel cinema and are mostly in Gujarati or English or a combination of the two. In the few recent instances, such as *Maska* (2020) and *Shirin Farhad Ki Toh Nikal Padi* (2012), where Parsi characters do centre the more commercially viable Hindi film, they are amalgams of their more well-known cultural touchpoints, easily conjured and indistinguishable.

Even so, these films enable the presence of another, distinctive Bombay on screen. As is true of its patchwork composition, different parts of Bombay have traditionally been home to different communities and a focus on any one such group will necessitate a documenting of those quarters and their particular local colour, along with that community's unique motivations, aspirations and anxieties. These films that feature Parsis open up then a Bombay of ageing colonial-era homes, clubs and self-contained residential colonies, of wider, less-crowded roads—a world distant from the more customary images of the busier northern suburbs, of concerns around assimilation, exclusivity and social responsibility, of off-limits religious spaces and practices ironically rendered somewhat accessible by cinema.

Little Zizou 2008

In *Pestonjee*, ornate Victorian furniture, stately European statues crested with clocks and lamps, grand pianos, and carved rosewood cupboards with inset mirrors that reflect faces enclosed by objects clutter the frames and insides of the Parsi homes. There are brief moments of respite when Pirojshah takes a transfer from Bombay to the smaller town of Bhusawal and is able to savour its open spaces and greenery. But with every return to the city, he finds the walls around him and the others decisively closing in. With every visit to Bombay, Pesi's (Anupam Kher) building, which his long-time friend Pirojshah dutifully frequents, looks dingier, its structure like the marriage it houses falling into disrepair. The stifling, hollow and vertiginous nature of interior space in *Pestonjee* is most effectively presented in an overhead shot ostensibly in a nightmare Pirojshah has one evening. In the dream, an almost unhinged Jeroo's (Shabana Azmi) cries for help echo from the bottom of his own home's spiral stairwell. The belongings that fill up the interiors create discord—while Pesi and his step-brother fight an extended legal battle over them, the piano that Jeroo brings after their wedding becomes an

Such a Long Journey
1998

early source of annoyance for Pesi, prefiguring the estrangement that follows. That they are ornamental vestiges of a bygone time and ultimately of little actual worth is apparent when a distraught Jeroo exclaims in the end that there are statues and chandeliers to fill the house but no money to pay for Pesi's funeral. Despite all of Pirojshah's reservations about the uninhibited half-Parsi advocate Soona (Kirron Kher), it is to her airier home, spacious enough to host dance classes in, that Pesi had periodically escaped for comfort.

The oppressive physical spaces in *Pestonjee* are a representation of the restrictive, exclusionary social environment of its characters. Jeroo and Pesi marry not for love or common ideals. Theirs is a convenient pairing fixed and executed swiftly by community elders because they are both Parsis. While Jeroo divulges early on that she had a non-Parsi boyfriend in Aden who was summarily rejected by her family, Pirojshah is certain that a Parsi girl would have never betrayed Pesi the way a non-Parsi one had in the past. The choice to belong ironically creates a deep sense of loneliness in both husband and wife and by extension in those around them. When a character remarks upon the irresponsibility of the younger generation's refusing to marry within the community and have children, the film adds its voice to a concern that has surfaced repeatedly in discourses about the future of this dwindling community—the fear of extinction.

What connects Pestonjee with Homi Adajania's dark tale of murder and familial dysfunction, *Being Cyrus* (2005), is the discordant nature of the principal character's interactions with others. Pirojshah is shy and reserved and we know that it is his failure to communicate his feelings promptly that results in his losing Jeroo to Pesi. And yet we are privy to an internal monologue which, by revealing what he truly thinks of the people around him, tells us much about his suspicions and judgement of others. A similar incongruity between how Cyrus (Saif Ali Khan) behaves and what he really intends is central to the deception both he and the film perform, a disconnect that is literalised in the final revelation that he is actually Xerxes who was only "being Cyrus" in this shocking episode that the film recounts.

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The second point of similarity between these two films set nearly two decades apart is their use of internal space to comment on social and moral behaviour. In her essay 'Fiction, Collision, and the Grotesque: The Dystopic Fragments of Bombay Cinema', Ranjani Mazumdar writes that "[i]nstead of spending screen time on the public spaces of the city, Adajania constructs Parsee identity through inner landscapes." The rot in the relationships is reflected in the state of both the settings that the film revolves around—the crumbling building in Bombay which houses one half of the Sethna family and in which old Fardounjee (Honey Chhaya) is locked up and mistreated and the second disorderly household in Panchgani which is slowly and surely falling into ruin. Mazumdar discusses how the grim interiors indicate an anxiety around the disappearance of Parsi identity. But while the trope of the dangerous outsider who ingratiates himself with unsuspecting members only to slowly unleash trouble is a common one; home for all the Sethnas was an unsafe and unhappy space even before Cyrus had anything to do with it. The realisation in the film that the Sethnas are perhaps one in a long line of Parsi families to have been ensnared and destroyed in this way by the perpetrators points both to their acute understanding of family dynamics and also to the filmmaker's own dark, cynical vision of a larger internal moral decay.

In *Such a Long Journey* (1998), Sturla Gunnarsson's Indo-Canadian adaptation of Rohinton Mistry's acclaimed novel, the opening film title is displayed on an image

of the Khodadad Building in Byculla which shelters the Noble family and their Parsi neighbours, announcing at the outset the structure's significance to the film. Gustad Noble (Roshan Seth) has seen better days, which are glimpsed through his sepia-tinted reveries of an affluent childhood home, while his present social and financial decline is manifested in his dingy home and squalid surroundings, in particular a compound wall that becomes a source of stench and disease until he turns it into a roadside shrine by engaging the skills of a street artist. The building and its occupants provide daily internal challenges for Gustad to overcome—from his son's defiance and daughter's illness to the misdemeanours of a mentally disturbed lodger. But an external trial in the form of a covert request from his RAW agent-friend situates him in a secondary space, the bustling and encroaching city outside, whose changing street names are already a sign of the growing power of parochial political groups, and whose traversed sites in the film include the bank in South Bombay in which he works and to which he walks from the crowded Victoria Terminus station every day, the Irani cafés with their 'family cabins' guaranteeing privacy and the streets of Chor Bazaar with their bookstores and brothels.

Also important is the fact that with two of Gustad's friends dying in the film, *Such a Long Journey* through its Parsi protagonist gives momentary access to the rituals around the dead that are not only strictly closed to outsiders but have also become deeply contentious issues within the community in recent years.

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Pervez Merwanji's *Percy* (1989) frequently escapes the confines of the Parsi home as it follows its eponymous hero in his wanderings around Bombay's famous business district at Fort, past Flora Fountain and through the Oval Maidan, in buses and at bus stops, in lanes past boys playing cricket and along empty streets at night. Percy (an empathetic Kurush Deboo in his first film role) is caught between the over-protectiveness and traditionalism of his mother Banubai (Ruby Patel) that pervades the home and his own desires and interests which are associated with the outside world. Being timid, he is constantly bullied by his more aggressive Hindu colleagues, picked on by the colony boys and hesitant to approach women. He works at a company that sells products to boost virility and throughout the film is told by everyone from his boss to the ghost of his dead friend to man up, to do more, to not waste time. That the bashful Percy with his love of Western music and dreams of marrying his beautiful childhood friend is utterly alienated from the more forceful, demanding world around him is apparent in a scene in which he, recently unemployed, sits aimlessly by the road as people rush past him purposefully. Like Naseeruddin Shah in *Pestonjee* who played Pirojshah with a stooped posture and a constant nervous twitching of the eyes, Deboo externalises Percy's fears and disappointments, giving him a jittery, shrinking demeanour. Additionally, the speech of these characters, irrespective of whether the films are in Hindi, English or Gujarati, lends authenticity by making meticulous use of Parsi inflections, expressions and speech patterns.

Maska 2020

In *The Good Parsi: The Fate of a Colonial Elite in a Postcolonial Society*, TM Luhrmann writes that *Percy* was disliked by Parsi viewers because they took Percy's browbeaten, powerless persona as a characterisation of the prevailing perception of a once highly influential community. However, many of the film's themes—the clash between traditional and liberal values, a domineering mother figure, an upright central character and his haplessness in matters of the heart—became ready-to-use narrative devices employed regularly in later films crystallising a very specific and inflexible idea of Parsi manners and experiences, a development *Percy*'s original Parsi audience had in fact predicted. Moreover, like Gustad Noble's had in *Such a Long Journey*, Banubai's religiosity made way for the depiction of some of the more orthodox aspects of Parsi life which include rituals like drawing chalk patterns on the threshold, burning incense, morning and evening kusti prayers, and daily visits to the *agiary*. These too, along with the *sudreh* (a white, religious undershirt worn by Parsis) have become part of the popular iconography of Parsi films, often losing their potency through indiscriminate use.

In *Ferrari Ki Sawaari* (2012), for instance, the ultimate signifier of the honest

Pestonjee
1987

government official Rusy's (Sharman Joshi) love for his son and his desperate desire to see him fulfil his own cricketing dreams is his decision to commit an unlawful act. In *Shirin Farhad Ki Toh Nikal Padi*, on the other hand, shy, luckless, 40-something lingerie salesman Farhad (Boman Irani) finds love at long last in the otherwise perfectly matched Shirin (Farah Khan), only to be suddenly opposed by his mother Nargis (Daisy Irani) who retains an affectionate yet firm hold on his life. The ground on which she rejects the union is a deliberately absurd one, concerning the removal of an illegal water tank—an arbitrary plot point which the film devises not simply because this is a comedy where the conflict must only be a half-serious one but specifically because this is a comedy about Parsis, where the unreasonableness can be explained away as just another Parsi 'quirk', the film ultimately relying on the entrenched stereotype to tell its story. This trope of a power tussle between an overbearing mother and her single son is found also in Basu Chatterjee's *Khatta Meetha* (1978), a film which despite its opening dedication to the Parsi community tells a story which apart from its occasional stock mentions of visits to agiaris or a trip to the holy town of Udvada, and some readily recognisable visual markers in the characters' clothes and appearances, is deeply unspecific.

Neeraj Udhwani's *Maska* (2020), too, places at its centre a Bollywood-inclined son's desire to break away from his mother who wishes him to inherit and run the Irani café that has been the pride of their family for generations. The film's resolution in favour of traditional values, with the son choosing his legacy and a Parsi girl over his acting dreams and non-Parsi girlfriend, may also be read as a glossy, excessively sentimental eulogy for Mumbai's slowly shuttering Irani cafés. The film is steeped in clichés, about everything from Parsi cuisine to Parsi physical features, and even employs actor Boman Irani—who like Kurush Deboo has played several Parsi characters through his career—to play himself, thereby turning Irani's background and reputation as a well-known Parsi actor into yet another easy, reliable symbol to populate this ultimately superficial story about Parsis.

In Sooni Taraporevala's *Little Zizou*, though, which addresses key Parsi concerns around identity, integration, belonging and survival, the clash between traditional and modern ideas is delightfully dramatised. The conflict is localised in the film's primary setting of a Parsi *baug*, specifically in Cozy Building in Gowalia Tank where the director herself grew up, and embodied in the opposing forces of the self-proclaimed god-man Cyrus II Khodaiji (Sohrab Ardeshir) who has initiated a purifying drive and heads an army devoted to the vigilant gatekeeping of Zoroastrianism, and the free-thinking newspaper editor Boman Presswala (Boman Irani) who is determined to condemn and ridicule the former's intolerant and impractical views. There is neglect, strain and unreliability in one's household and music, dance and love in the other's. With the fight quickly escalating, the rest of the characters take sides but the filmmaker's own stand on the debate remains unmistakeable. The film is an insider's affectionate, concerned critique of her own community. While a gentle scene by the sea sees two children discussing how the first Parsis escaping persecution journeyed to India, as if revelling in a wistful collective memory of endurance, the film also reveals the exclusionary strategies that threaten the import and power of that myth along with the future of the community. The filmmaker criticises the patriarchal customs that disown Parsi women who marry out while retaining within its fold men who do the same and questions the opposition to conversions pointing at an essential confusion of race with religion.

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Taraporevala has said that all her work concerning Parsis, which include her film, screenplays and the arresting photographic study of the community she published in 2000, *Parsis: The Zoroastrians of India*, has been done with the intention to remember and preserve what may die out. It is also interesting that the films that uncover something of the truth of Parsi lives are the ones that have come in one way or another from members of the community. Now while that may be the result of the somewhat closed nature of the community itself or the relative dominance of other, more visible cultural groups which have shaped perceptions through storytelling, what is more important is that these films, too, few as they are and albeit fictional, serve as resources, documenting manners and habits, lives that have been lived and spaces that have been inhabited—stories and records that do and will endure. ■