



The Gilded Periphery: Intersectionality and Double Marginalization of Parsi Women in Nergis Dalal's Skin Deep

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Abstract

This paper seeks to examine the nuanced layers of socio-cultural exclusion in Nergis Dalal's novel *Skin Deep* (2005) through the lens of intersectionality and double marginalization. Set against the backdrop of the dwindling Parsi community in India, the novel moves beyond a mere domestic saga of twin rivalry to critique the systemic displacement of the female subject. By utilizing Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's framework of the "doubly marginalized" and Naomi Wolf's "Beauty Myth," this study argues that the protagonist, Naaz, is simultaneously sidelined by her status as a member of a micro-minority and by an internal patriarchal hierarchy that commodifies female aesthetics.

The analysis focuses on the "Anxiety of Extinction" prevalent within the Parsi diaspora, which enforces rigid standards of purity and marriageability, thereby reducing the female body to a site of communal preservation. Furthermore, the paper explores how the "whiteness" of the twins' Anglo-Indian heritage creates a complex aesthetic scale, where Naaz's perceived "plainness" results in a secondary, domestic marginalization. Ultimately, this paper posits that Dalal uses the metaphor of "skin" to expose the superficiality of communal belonging and the profound psychological alienation of the woman who fails to meet the dual demands of ethnic purity and conventional beauty.

Keywords: Parsi Diaspora, Double Marginalization, Nergis Dalal, Postcolonial Feminism, The Beauty Myth, Minority Identity.

Introduction: The Socio-Literary Context

The Parsi Zoroastrian community in India occupies a paradoxical space in the national consciousness: a "micro-minority" that has historically functioned as a colonial elite, yet currently faces a profound "anxiety of extinction" due to dwindling demographic numbers (Luhmann). Following their migration from Persia

to the shores of Gujarat, the Parsis cultivated a unique identity as cultural intermediaries between the British Raj and the Indian masses. This history of liminality of being neither fully Western nor traditionally “Eastern” has left the community in a state of gilded periphery. They remain highly visible in India’s economic and philanthropic history, yet numerically vulnerable, clinging to a preservationist ethos that often borders on the exclusionary.

Nergis Dalal, a seasoned and often under-studied chronicler of the Parsi domestic sphere, explores these tensions with surgical precision in her novel *Skin Deep* (2005). Dalal’s narrative moves beyond the typical domestic saga to investigate the psychological costs of belonging to a community that is simultaneously progressive in its education and insular in its religious purity laws. She centers her critique on the fractured lives of twin sisters, Naaz and Yasmin, who serve as a poignant metaphor for the split identity of the Parsi woman. Through their contrasting experiences, Dalal highlights a fundamental problem: the Parsi female subject is not merely a witness to her community’s struggle for survival, but is a victim of its internal hierarchies.

The novel’s predicament is embodied in the rivalry between the twins. While Yasmin possesses the “aesthetic capital” (Bourdieu) that the community prizes, Naaz is relegated to the intellectual margins. This sibling binary reflects a larger communal malaise: the reduction of the Parsi woman to a symbol of “purity” and “pedigree.” Consequently, the paper argues that Dalal’s novel critiques the **double marginalization** of Parsi women. They are marginalized first by their external status as a shrinking ethnic minority in a vast, pluralistic nation, a condition that forces them into a defensive mode of living where individual agency is sacrificed for communal longevity.

Second, they are marginalized internally by a communal culture that commodifies the female body, prizing a Eurocentric aesthetic of “whiteness”, a legacy of colonial mimicry and adherence to traditional domestic roles. In *Skin Deep*, the protagonist’s struggle for agency reveals that for the Parsi woman, identity is often a performative act dictated by a skin-deep morality. This morality devalues the intellectual self in favor of the decorative object, effectively silencing the woman twice over: once by the nation that overlooks her small community, and once by the community that overlooks her individual humanity.

The Parsi community in India occupies a paradoxical space—a “miniscule small minority” that transitioned from being a colonial elite to a community facing a rapid “decline on a rapid scale” following the departure of the British (Tayaru 42). Within this “fragile sociocultural ecosystem,” Nergis Dalal emerges as a writer who “delved deep into the layers of the human mind” to record the “intimate exploration of the intricacies of life’s conflicts” (Shukla and Pradhan 47).

Unlike contemporary Rohinton Mistry, whose early work tends to “analyse the females for hearth and men for offices” (Lalit 198), Dalal focuses on women who have “broken through the mould” and “moved away from the traditional portrayals of enduring, self-sacrificing women” (Sundari and Sandhya 1; Shukla and Pradhan 52). Her novel *Skin Deep* serves as a “reformation” of communal views, suggesting that the Parsi future in India depends on moving beyond “skin-deep” assessments of worth (Tayaru 47).

Literature Review & Theoretical Framework

The critical study of Parsi literature has historically centered on the “Anxiety of Extinction” and the community’s negotiation with the postcolonial Indian state. To understand *Skin Deep*, one must first locate it within the broader Parsi canon, dominated by luminaries such as Bapsi Sidhwa and Rohinton Mistry. While Mistry’s *Family Matters* and Sidhwa’s *The Crow Eaters* masterfully document the communal rituals,

eccentricities, and the political displacement of the Parsi subject, Nergis Dalal carves a distinct niche by shifting the gaze inward—specifically toward the politics of the female body. Where Sidhwa deals with the trauma of Partition and Mistry with the decay of the urban middle class, Dalal focuses on the “aesthetic violence” practiced within the Parsi domestic sphere. She suggests that the community's survival is not threatened merely by external demographics, but by an internal obsession with a superficial, colonial standard of beauty.

Situating *Skin Deep* requires a comparison with the “canonical” Parsi voice of Rohinton Mistry. While Mistry is celebrated for his “humane portrayals of Indian social life,” his female characters, such as Dina Dalal in *A Fine Balance*, are often “hampered by the same social constraints” and “societal structures that limit women’s autonomy” (Kumari 439; Saranya and Najam 102). Dalal, however, shifts the focus from external socio-political upheavals to “psychological marginalization” (Shukla and Pradhan 47).

Theoretical Grounding: Double Marginalization

To decode the layers of exclusion in Dalal’s work, this paper utilizes Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s conceptualization of Double Marginalization. Spivak, a foundational figure in postcolonial feminism, posits that the “subaltern” woman is oppressed by the dual forces of patriarchy and colonial/ethnic structures. In the context of *Skin Deep*, the Parsi woman is caught in a “double bind.” Externally, she belongs to a micro-minority that is frequently ignored in the grand narrative of a Hindu-majority India. Internally, however, she is not liberated; she is further marginalized by a communal patriarchy that demands she be the “perfect vessel” for a shrinking culture. She is silenced by the nation as a “Parsi” and silenced by her community as a “Woman.”

The papers confirm that marginalization is an “act of placing a person in a position of lesser importance” (Saranya and Najam 102). For the Parsi woman, this is a “double marginalization.” As Spivak suggests, she is “subverted, suppressed, and marginalized” by both the national narrative and a community that “clings to the practices of their forefathers” to maintain “ethnic purity” (Lalit 198; Tayaru 42).

The Beauty Myth and Aesthetic Capital

Complementing Spivak’s framework is Naomi Wolf’s theory in *The Beauty Myth*. Wolf argues that beauty is not an objective aesthetic standard but a political tool—a “currency system” designed to keep women in a state of perpetual self-consciousness and competition. Dalal applies this myth to the Parsi context with devastating clarity. Because the Parsis historically sought to distinguish themselves through “fairness” and “Westernization” (a form of colonial mimicry), beauty in the novel is inextricably linked to whiteness.

Through the twins, Naaz and Yasmin, Dalal illustrates how Aesthetic Capital (Bourdieu) functions as the only valid currency for the Parsi female. Yasmin, the “beautiful” twin, is granted social visibility and familial affection, while Naaz, the “plain” twin, is relegated to the psychological periphery. This theoretical intersection allows us to see that Naaz’s marginalization is not merely a “family drama,” but a reflection of a community that has internalized colonial standards of worth. By intellectualizing her struggle, Dalal challenges the Parsi canon to move beyond the “nostalgia of the colony” and confront the gendered exclusions that persist within its “gilded” drawing rooms.

The Communal Gaze: Purity, Pedigree, and the Female Body

The primary margin in *Skin Deep* is defined by what sociologist T.M. Luhmann identifies as the “Anxiety of Extinction.” For the Parsi community—a group whose numbers have been in steady decline since the

mid-20th century—the preservation of the “bloodline” is not merely a traditional preference but an existential obsession. Dalal masterfully illustrates how this communal anxiety manifests as a “Communal Gaze,” a form of panoptic surveillance that settles most heavily upon the Parsi woman. In the novel, the female body is stripped of individual agency and reimagined as a biological vessel for the community's survival.

This gaze is enforced through the rigid laws of endogamy and the refusal to accept converts. Within the text, the Grandmother figure acts as the gatekeeper of this purity. Her role is significant; she represents the internal policing mechanism of a minority culture. The marginalization occurs when a woman's “worth” is calculated by her ability to produce a “pure-blooded” heir. This reduces the complexities of female identity to a binary of purity versus pollution. Naaz and Yasmin are raised in an environment where their movements, social circles, and eventual marital prospects are scrutinized not for their personal happiness, but for their contribution to the demographic ledger. The “Double Marginalization” begins here: as Parsis, they are a fringe element of the Indian state, but as women, they are marginalized within that fringe, forced to inhabit a “Gilded Cage” where their only freedom is the freedom to conform to ancient mandates of lineage.

Cultural Hybridity: The “Sophie Factor” and the Hybridity Trap

The marginalization of the twins is further complicated by Cultural Hybridity, introduced through the character of their mother, Sophie. As an Englishwoman married into a Parsi family, Sophie is the ultimate “Outsider Within.” Her presence introduces a colonial tension into the household, creating what Homi Bhabha calls “the third space”—a zone of hybridity that is both productive and profoundly alienating.

Sophie's role is crucial in understanding why the twins are “never Parsi enough” nor “Western enough.” Because she is a non-Parsi, her children occupy a precarious position in the eyes of the orthodox community. They are “hybrids” in a culture that fetishizes “purity.” This hybridity creates a specific type of marginalization. We can see Sophie, marginalized herself by her mother-in-law and the Parsi social circles, attempts to reclaim power by imposing her own Western “Beauty Myth” on her daughters. She favors Yasmin because Yasmin reflects the Eurocentric aesthetic that Sophie perceives as a form of social currency. For Naaz, this hybridity is a double-edged sword. She is pushed to the margins of Parsi identity because of her mother's “foreignness,” yet she is also pushed to the margins of her mother's affection because she does not possess the “English Rose” beauty of her sister.

Dalal uses Sophie to critique the Parsi community's historical “Colonial Mimicry.” The Parsis historically aligned themselves with the British to maintain their elite status; however, in the postcolonial world of *Skin Deep*, this mimicry has become a trap. The twins are caught between a grandmother who demands religious “purity” and a mother who demands aesthetic “perfection.” Neither standard allows for the development of a genuine, autonomous self.

Consequently, the “First Margin” is not just about being a minority in India; it is about the internal fractures of a community that is so afraid of disappearing that it refuses to let its women evolve. The twins are “marginalized by the mirror” and “marginalized by the temple,” left to navigate a world where their value is perpetually “skin deep.”

The primary margin is defined by a distinct and detached religious identity (Remona 324). Because the community is miniscule, there is an adamant refusal to mix, which results in the Parsi woman being “shackled” by the expectations of the “Communal Gaze” (Remona 324; Lalit 198). The twins' mother, Sophie, complicates this by introducing “cultural hybridity.” As an Englishwoman, she is part of the “Parsi

propensity for social welfare” yet remains an outsider, creating a home environment where the twins are “never Parsi enough” (Remona 324). Interestingly, the Grandmother acts as a counter-force to this marginalization by “choosing to leave her legacy in the capable hands of her granddaughter rather than her only son,” showing that within the Parsi family, women can occasionally find “care and support” that bypasses patriarchal preference (Remona 324; Shukla and Pradhan 47).

Intersectionality in the Parsi Domestic Sphere

In the domestic architecture of *Skin Deep*, the Grandmother serves as the most complex intersection of tradition and gendered power. Unlike Sophie, who represents the external, colonial gaze, the Grandmother represents the internal, ancestral gaze of the Parsi community. She is a fascinating study in the “patriarchal bargain”—a term coined by sociologist Deniz Kandiyoti to describe how women in traditional societies accept and even enforce patriarchal rules to gain a measure of security and power within the system.

While the Grandmother offers Naaz a sense of cultural belonging that Sophie denies her, she simultaneously reinforces the very structures that marginalize the twins. She is the one who emphasizes the Navjote and the Achoo Meecho, rituals that define the “purity” of the Parsi bloodline. By doing so, she unwittingly turns the girls into artifacts of a vanishing culture. She loves them, yet she evaluates them through the lens of community survival. Here, the “Double Marginalization” is perfected: the Grandmother, herself a victim of a culture that likely limited her own agency, becomes the instrument through which the next generation is stifled. She proves that marginalization is often a self-perpetuating cycle, maintained by those who are most affected by it.

The Intersection of Race and Gender: The “Fair” Parsi

The intersectionality in *Skin Deep* is most visible in the community’s obsession with “fairness.” For the Parsi woman, beauty is not just about symmetry; it is about “racial pedigree.” Dalal highlights how the community’s historical desire to be seen as distinct from the larger Indian masses—often by aligning themselves with European features—has created an internal racial hierarchy.

Yasmin is not just pretty; she is “Parsi-pretty,” embodying the fair-skinned ideal that serves as a bridge between the community’s Persian roots and its colonial aspirations. Naaz, being slightly darker or plainer, fails this racialized aesthetic test. This is where Intersectionality (Crenshaw) is most acute: Naaz is not just marginalized as a woman or as a Parsi, but as a specific type of Parsi woman who fails the whiteness standard. Her struggle is therefore a three-fold battle against her gender, her ethnicity’s demographic panic, and her community’s internalized colorism.

This Second Margin is where “psychological marginalization” is most acute. The papers argue that Naaz is “reared differently in the same family milieu” (Shukla and Pradhan 47). The sister-knot in conflict is a causative theme where Yasmin’s “fair complexion brings everything for her easily” while Naaz is left to struggle with “deep-rooted hatred and repentance” (Sundari 1; Shukla and Pradhan 47-52). For a Parsi woman, “Skin” is indeed a more powerful currency than “Soul.” The “concept of self-identity and social existence” becomes “deeply rooted in women’s psychology,” leading Naaz to search for an “independent way of living” as a response to being “relegated to the fringe” because of her appearance (Shukla and Pradhan 52; Saranya and Najam 102).

Conclusion

Nergis Dalal's *Skin Deep* serves as a profound indictment of a community that, in its desperate attempt to preserve its surface, has begun to hollow out its core. Through the lives of Naaz and Yasmin, Dalal proves that the Parsi Identity is not a monolith, but a fractured experience heavily dependent on gender and appearance.

The Double Marginalization explored in this paper reveals a tragic irony: by forcing its women into the "Gilded Cage" of aesthetic and domestic perfection, the Parsi community marginalizes the very individuals who are essential for its intellectual and cultural revival. Naaz's eventual move toward education and independence suggests a "breaking of the mirror," a rejection of the idea that a woman's worth is merely "skin deep." However, the novel leaves us with a haunting question: can the Parsi woman ever be truly free if her community remains obsessed with the purity of its skin at the expense of its soul?

Dalal's work remains essential because it challenges the "nostalgic" narrative of Parsi life, replacing it with a raw, intersectional reality that demands we see the woman behind the ritual.

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