

“Like Us, You’re In Between”: Parsi Identity as Liminal Becoming in Contemporary Historical Crime Novels of Bombay

Muhsina Najeeb

`muhsina.1ec072201@cukerala.ac.in`

Central University of Kerala

Joseph Koyippally Joseph

Central University of Kerala

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Abstract

This article examines Parsi identity in three historical crime novels set in Bombay: Nev March's *Murder in Old Bombay* (2020), Sujata Massey's *A Murder on Malabar Hill* (2018), and Vaseem Khan's *Midnight at Malabar House* (2020). It uses liminality as an alternative to the more familiar ideas of hybridity and marginality. Drawing on van Gennep and Turner, and developing their ideas through Thomassen's understanding of liminality as an interstitial condition, Szokolczai's concept of permanent liminality, and Stenner's idea of liminal affective technologies, the article argues that the novels present Parsi modernity as an ongoing state of becoming. Practices such as dress, food, domestic space, and English education help the community distinguish itself from others, but they do not lead to a clear or stable sense of belonging. Set in 1892, 1921, and 1949–50, the novels show how Parsi in-betweenness changes across different historical moments, from a colonial intermediary position to nationalist suspicion and finally to postcolonial uncertainty. The analysis is chronological but not teleological. Two questions guide the discussion: who controls the movement across the threshold, and what does living on the threshold give to and take from the Parsi community? The detective plot reflects this unfinished movement. Each investigation restores order to the immediate crisis, but none provides the Parsi community with a stable place within the changing social and political order.

Introduction

Midway through Nev March's *Murder in Old Bombay*, the narrator Captain Jim Agnihotri, an Anglo-Indian orphan hired by a Parsi family to investigate the deaths of two women of that family, returns to the Framji dinner table still wearing a Pathan disguise. Adi Framji remarks that he now looks like an Indian, "a native, as the English would say." Jim replies, "Sir, I am a native." The father corrects them both: "'No,' rumbled his father, 'you're not. Like us, you're in between, or both. Neither fully English, nor fully Indian'" (March, 2020, pp. 152–153). Everything surrounding the sentence matters as much as the sentence itself. It is spoken at a table over a meal mixing sausage with lamb curry and ending in an English pudding. It is addressed to a man in borrowed clothes. It is spoken in English by a Gujarati-speaking household and ends with a servant bringing "bowls of water in which to wash our fingers" (p. 153). Dress, food, language, and domestic ritual come together in this scene and mark the position that the sentence names. Jim's response is not an argument but appetite, "a warm moment of solidarity glowing within me" (p. 153). That solidarity comes from eating together in a state that neither party can leave.

This article argues that Parsi identity in these three novels is best understood through liminality rather than through the more established ideas of hybridity or marginality. This does not mean that those terms are wrong. They describe different aspects of identity. A community may be structurally marginal in one relation, culturally hybrid in another, and liminal in a particular historical transition. In-betweenness is the condition represented in these novels. Liminality helps us understand the temporality of that condition, its ongoing nature and its lack of a clear endpoint. The anglicization of the community through English clothing, food, domestic form, and education is therefore treated neither as a set of cultural traits nor as ritual in the strict anthropological sense. Instead, these practices are understood as a repertoire that

works as ritual technology within the passage reconstructed in this article. They mark a movement away from an earlier social position without providing a stable way of becoming part of a new one.

Four questions organize what follows. What does liminality allow us to understand that hybridity and marginality cannot? How do the materials of anglicization work as ritual technology rather than simply as period detail? Who wants the Parsi to remain liminal, and who occupies, in Thomassen's phrase, the position of "master of the ceremony" (2014, p. 4)? And what does the threshold give to and take from those who live on it? Three limits, restated in the conclusion, guide the argument throughout. Liminality is not the same as the absence of exclusion. Detective closure is not the same as communal incorporation. Fictional representation is not transparent historical evidence.

Liminality, Not Marginality: Conceptual Groundwork

The framework used below is hierarchical rather than cumulative. Van Gennep and Turner provide the basic concept of a passage with phases, thresholds, and a terminus. Thomassen provides the correction that keeps liminality distinct from marginality and hybridity. Szakolczai extends the concept towards permanence. Stenner and Zittoun provide the bridge from ritual to reading, which allows a literary corpus to be treated as evidence.

Arnold van Gennep's founding proposition is that life is "a series of passages from one age to another and from one occupation to another," managed by "ceremonies whose essential purpose is to enable the individual to pass from one defined position to another which is equally well defined" (1909/1960, pp. 2–3). When the destination is undefined, or when the authority that defines it disappears, the ceremony has nothing to complete. He names the phases "preliminal rites (rites of separation), liminal rites (rites of transition), and postliminal rites (rites of incorporation)" (p. 11). As Szakolczai and Thomassen (2019, p. 42) observe, he introduces the liminal in a chapter on territorial passage. Liminality begins as a spatial concept. It emerges from borderlands where "whoever passes from one to the other ... wavers between two worlds" and then contracts, by scalar logic, to the doorsill: "to cross the threshold ... is to unite oneself with a new world" (van Gennep, 1909/1960, pp. 18, 20).

Two specifications are important for the readings that follow. On food, the rite of eating together "is clearly a rite of incorporation, of physical union," yet "a union by this means may be permanent, but more often it lasts only during the period of digestion" (p. 29). On clothing, the conferral of costume often marks the end of a passage, as when "the gift of the costume, which concludes the initiation, is made on another day and according to a special ceremony" (p. 83). A community that changes its clothes without ever receiving the new costume from an authorized hand is, in van Gennep's terms, stalled. This is close to the "transitional periods which sometimes acquire a certain autonomy" that he himself anticipated (pp. 191–192).

Liminal personae, or "threshold people," "elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space." They "are neither here nor there; they are betwixt

and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial” (Turner, 1969/1977, p. 95). Turner also provides an important distinction that much later writing has collapsed: “Communitas breaks in through the interstices of structure, in liminality; at the edges of structure, in marginality; and from beneath structure, in inferiority” (p. 128). Interstice, edge, and underneath describe three different topologies. Turner anticipated permanence as well when he wrote of the Christian pilgrim, “Transition has here become a permanent condition” (p. 107).

Thomassen identifies as “highly problematic” the “tendency to use liminality as synonymous [sic] with ‘marginality’: to simply posit ‘liminal subjects’ as those who are marginalized and socially excluded” (2014, p. 7). When used in this way, “the term has nothing additional to offer.” His distinction is worth quoting in full: “While liminality and marginality share affinities (being boundary-concepts), they are also very different terms: that which is interstitial is neither marginal nor on the outside; liminality refers, quite literally, to something placed in an in-between position” (pp. 7–8). He is equally critical of the celebratory reading in which liminality becomes “quite simply a positive expression of cultural hybridity” and so, “with one stroke of magic, undoes all that, dissolving any fixity of position, dissolving the modern into permanent hybridity” (p. 8). Against both approaches, “liminality is not something simply to be celebrated or wished for. Quite the contrary: liminality needs to be duly and carefully problematized” (p. 8).

The existing criticism, as the next section shows, has predominantly followed Bhabha. Thomassen’s typology, meanwhile, provides exactly the category the Parsi case requires. The intersection of epoch with group is filled by “Religious Fraternities, Ethnic minorities ... Groups that live at the edge of ‘normal structures’, often perceived as both dangerous and ‘holy’” (2014, p. 90). A religious minority sustained across generations in an in-between position is therefore not an extension of the concept. It is already a cell in Thomassen’s table.

If liminality can extend, it can also stop extending and simply persist. For Szokolczai, “a persistent provocation of liminality ... might culminate in a most paradoxical situation where the temporary and transitory become enduring and lasting, or a situation of permanent liminality” (2017, p. 236). This condition arises when the phases of the sequence “become frozen, as if a film stopped at a particular frame” (Szokolczai, 2000, as cited in Thomassen, 2014, p. 93). Thomassen’s verdict is unambiguous: “No culture would be foolish enough to devise a ritual sequence that stops at the liminal ... Human life ceases to be meaningful in perpetual liminality” (2014, p. 216). Szokolczai and Thomassen (2019) are blunter: “Liminality is not a solution to anything” (p. 258).

Against this stands Hadromi-Allouche and MacKay’s *Betwixt and Between*, whose editors ask “the extent to which liminality as a permanent position makes a preferable choice” (MacKay & Hadromi-Allouche, 2023, p. 5). Their volume also provides the sharpest distinction between liminars and marginals, in Turner’s own words: “Marginals like liminars are also betwixt and between, but unlike ritual liminars they have no cultural assurance of a final stable resolution of their ambiguity” (Turner, 1974, as cited in

MacKay & Hadromi-Allouche, 2023, p. 4). That missing assurance, rather than exclusion, poverty, or powerlessness, is what the readings below track.

One genealogical point matters for a cultural-psychological readership. Liminality's origin is not only anthropological. Van Gennep may have known "the use of the term *limen* within early psychology," where Herbart and Fechner used it for the "threshold of intensity beyond which a stimulus presented to a subject is consciously experienced." The concept therefore carries "a bio-psychological significance which complements its psycho-sociological significance in anthropology" (Stenner, 2017, p. 262).

Stenner's second contribution is the one on which this article's method depends. Rituals "can thus be thought of as a kind of technology for producing moving experiences that are conducive of psychosocial transformation. I call them 'liminal affective technologies'" (2017, p. 24). He adds that the various art forms are technologies of the same kind. The two forms of liminality are causally linked because "the devised liminal experience engendered through liminal affective technologies helps us to navigate and manage spontaneous liminality" (p. 25). Ruptures shatter the symbolism that was adequate to the past, and these technologies "help us to create that symbolism and to drag it into emergence from the very edge of semantic availability" (p. 25).

Books, as "a curious 'world within a world,'" are "particularly suited to people who are themselves experiencing a phase of passage or transition 'between worlds' ... when we are in passage, they can help to get us through" (Stenner, 2021, p. 6). Zittoun (2021) adds that such reading enables "looping and proleptic movements" (p. 49) away from the here-and-now and back (Cabra, 2021). Three novels about a community mid-passage, written by diasporic authors for an international readership, are therefore a devised liminality about a spontaneous one.

The State of the Field

The criticism on these novelists is notable for its distribution and its vocabulary. The distribution is heavily weighted towards Massey. Perveen Mistry has attracted work on genre and postcolonial epistemology (G. T. & Mukherjee, 2026), archival silence (Najeeb, 2026a), cuisine and feminist geography (Najeeb, 2026b), feminist thematics (Mol et al., 2022; Sonal & Rani, 2020; Vijay & Tripathi, 2022), and historical memory (Parel, 2025). Khan's Persis Wadia has attracted one substantial article (Bantle, 2024). Nev March has attracted none, appearing once in a list of diasporic crime writers (Parel, 2025, p. 349) and never returned to. March's novel remains analytically untouched.

The vocabulary is more revealing. The Parsi is described but not theorized, and the most repeated claim is the access thesis: the in-between investigator can go where others cannot. Perveen's "hybrid identity equips her with the rational, evidence-based logic of Western detective traditions while granting privileged access to domestic and female centric spaces where British men are not restricted" (G. T. & Mukherjee, 2026, p. 2). Najeeb, working from archive theory, reaches the same conclusion: Perveen's position "shaped by both gender and minority identity" enables "access to suppressed historical perspectives" (2026a, p. 786). Bantle produces the same structure for Persis, whose office, background,

and ethnicity open “spaces to which white citizens are denied access” (2024, p. 53). Three critics, three frameworks, one conclusion. This should make us suspect that the conclusion is functioning as a premise. The access thesis explains what the in-between figure can do. It says nothing about what she is becoming, or what the becoming costs.

Where liminality is named, it is named as an adjective. G. T. and Mukherjee use the term repeatedly but define it once, citing Turner parenthetically and assimilating him at once to Bhabha (2026, p. 3), with no van Gennep, no separation, margin, or incorporation, and no temporality. The most supple use of liminality in Massey criticism belongs to Harris: “both Massey and Furutani use the liminality of their characters not only to critique specific aspects of American and Japanese cultures, but also to explore what it means to have a hyphenated identity of any kind” (Harris, 2007, p. 447). But Harris was writing about the Rei Shimura novels 11 years before Perveen Mistry existed. The apparatus was built for the wrong series and never carried across.

Three consequences define this article’s contribution. First, liminality has not been used as process, as a passage with phases, a duration, and a terminus, in relation to any of these novels. Second, no study reads all three novelists together, and none reads March at all. Third, the criticism treats Parsiness as additive to gender rather than as a structural condition, so that Parel’s “an upper-class, Parsi, feminist investigator” (2025, p. 356) becomes a list. That Parsis are a Zoroastrian minority of roughly 100,000 people in India does no analytic work anywhere in the scholarship.

Corpus and Method

The three novels are treated as three positions on a single passage rather than as independent objects. *Murder in Old Bombay* opens in February 1892, when Parsi mercantile confidence is near its height. *A Murder on Malabar Hill* is set in February 1921, in a city where nationalist mobilization has begun to reclassify Parsi proximity to the British as collaboration. *Midnight at Malabar House* runs from December 31, 1949, to Republic Day 1950, in the aftermath of Independence and Partition. Arranged in sequence, they allow the article to read Parsi modernity as a historically extended passage: an earlier social position unsettled (1892), the passage disturbed (1921), and the imagined destination of stable incorporation withdrawn (1950). The arrangement is heuristic rather than teleological. Three independently authored novels do not constitute a continuous historical record, and nothing here claims that Parsi history moved inevitably towards the threshold. The chronology is a device for tracing the changing conditions under which Parsi in-betweenness is imagined.

The choice of the historical crime novel as evidence is not incidental. Its authors are “writing women into history by imagining those ignored by the standard histories,” and serious writers in the genre “only include clothes in order to illustrate a point — historical, political, or criminal — and they take care to do so accurately” (Johnsen, 2006, pp. 4, 11). The genre therefore provides exactly the kind of material this article reads as ritual (Browne & Kreiser, 2000).

The method combines close reading of a small number of scenes with a documentary corpus of Parsi historiography (Palsetia, 2001), ethnography (Luhmann, 1996), and legal anthropology (Vevaina, 2023). Where novel and source coincide, as with Massey's Ripon Club and Luhmann's ethnographic account of it, the coincidence is treated as evidence that the fictional scene is doing documentary work. One structural claim underwrites what follows: the detective plot offers a formal analogue to the rite of passage. A crime disrupts an existing social order. An investigation suspends ordinary classifications and allows movement across boundaries that the investigator's competing statuses would otherwise close. Detection produces a provisional reordering. The analogy is deliberately weaker than isomorphism and is formal rather than sociological. These detectives are not statusless in Turner's sense. They hold specific and demanding statuses as lawyers, officers, women, professionals, and colonial or postcolonial subjects. But these statuses are multiple and unstably combined, which is precisely what licenses the movement. Narrative closure resolves a plot, not a passage. In all three novels, the solved crime conspicuously fails to secure the community's incorporation into a new position.

Discussion

The Rite of Clothing: The Sudreh Beneath the Bond Street Linen

Dress is where the Parsi passage is most visible, because dress is where van Gennep locates the "temporary differentiations such as the wearing of a special dress or mask" that "play a considerable role in rites of passage, since they are repeated at every change in an individual's life" (1909/1960, p. 74). Dress does not become a rite simply because it changes, and nothing here claims that it does. It functions as a ritual technology because the change described below is collective, directional, policed from within the community, and never terminated by a conferral. The community's founding legend already made dress a condition of asylum, with acceptance in Gujarat requiring the adoption of "the local language and dress" (Palsetia, 2001, p. 6). Nine centuries later, the direction reversed: "the rapid and inexorable Anglicization of Parsi manners reflected the coalescence of Parsi and British values from mid-century" (p. 153). The change was also policed from within. The Parsi-run weekly *Bombay Chabook* "urged the Parsis not to invite Manockjee to their parties" after that reformer abandoned the *jama* and *pichoree*, the white ceremonial dress worn by Parsi men (p. 157).

Luhmann records the endpoint: "for at least one hundred years," Parsis "as a community had taken the British as their community ideal ... they had worn the hot, uncomfortable Victorian dress — crazy in the Bombay heat — because that was what the British did" (1996, p. 21). She also reproduces the most economical image of the predicament, from a 1922 account in which the "Parsi girl wears her sacred shirt and her sacred coat" beneath English tailoring (p. 113). The *sudreh*, the sacred undershirt, and the *kusti*, the girdle wound about the waist, are worn under the Bond Street linen. Nothing is discarded and nothing is completed. The costume of the old status and that of the new are worn simultaneously.

The novels dramatize this layering at moments of maximum narrative pressure. In Massey, the sari is the instrument through which Parsiness is read from the body. Inside the Muslim *zenana*, the secluded

women's quarters, a child challenges Perveen: "'Why have you arranged your sari so strangely?' Shireen chirped ... 'It's not correct.'" Perveen answers, "'It's a good question ... I am a Parsi, and it is our custom to wear saris this way'" (Massey, 2018, p. 96). A shoulder is a border. Beneath it the sacred layer persists and is negotiated. On her wedding night, her husband notes awkwardly that she has "removed [her] *kusti* already" (p. 165).

March's Bombay is a room in which everyone is legible through costume. Burjor Framji presides at his own table "in a grand blue-black tunic and turban-like hat," while his wife sits in a white sari at the other end and a 10-year-old wears "a red jacket fashioned like an army uniform" (March, 2020, pp. 41–42). Three costumes, three degrees of anglicization, one family. Jim, dressed by the Framjis, provides the novel's own gloss the next morning: the fine clothes lay "utterly out of place in my dusty warehouse. Borrowed finery, just a disguise" (p. 49).

Khan's Persis is the limit case. She is never described in a sari. Saris in *Midnight at Malabar House* belong to housekeepers and socialites, while Persis wears khaki: "After dressing quickly in her khaki uniform, she bundled her long black hair into its habitual workaday bun, tucked her peaked cap under her arm, checked her revolver" (Khan, 2020, p. 22). The state uniform of the new republic has replaced both the sari and the English frock. A first-generation postcolonial professional resolves the wardrobe problem by refusing it. The resolution is provisional. On Republic Day, in the final chapter, she appears out of uniform for the first time and the poise collapses. She moves into the room "feeling acutely conscious of her appearance. Perhaps it had been a bad idea to put on a dress, and ... shoes that Aunt Nussie had gifted her a year ago" (p. 320). The uniform was itself a liminal costume, corresponding to Turner's stripping of insignia, in which liminars display "no status, property, insignia, secular clothing indicating rank or role" (1969/1977, p. 95). Out of it, Persis has no dress that fits. These scenes register a passage arrested where van Gennep says it should conclude: the costume that "concludes the initiation" (1909/1960, p. 83) is never conferred, because no uncontested authority remains with standing to confer it.

The Rite of Commensality: Dhansak on Wednesdays

If dress marks the passage, food attempts to complete it, but fails repeatedly and by design. Van Gennep's claim that shared eating "is clearly a rite of incorporation, of physical union" (1909/1960, p. 29) is doubled by his warning that the union "more often ... lasts only during the period of digestion" (p. 29). A community seeking incorporation through commensality must therefore eat itself into belonging every day. Parsis had originally adapted to Indian rules of purity and commensality, observing local taboos on beef and pork (Palsetia, 2001, p. 13). Luhrmann records the later state of the table in the sentence that concentrates the argument: "sometimes Parsi food simply meant westernized food," a "remarkably non-Hindu menu, yet not entirely English," at which bread is served, "not chappatis" (1996, p. 37). At the Ripon Club, the only exclusively Parsi club, whose early members had to be "male, prominent, and British-returned," "like most Parsi food, the menu is western ... but on Wednesday they served dhansak" (p. 43). *Dhansak*, the lentil-and-meat dish that is the community's signature, thus creates a liminal calendar. It is neither a survival nor an assimilation, but a weekly and scheduled interruption of an English menu, at a

club named for a Viceroy, in a city where that club exists because British clubs will not admit Indians. Parsis, in Luhrmann's summary, exemplify "torn loyalties to western and eastern style" across the whole repertoire (1996, p. 41).

All three novels are alert to this. In *March*, the Ripon Club is a chapter title and a threshold. Jim goes there in a borrowed black suit and top hat, after Diana Framji explains why he must: "They won't be at British Clubs since Indians aren't admitted, but you can try the Ripon" (March, 2020, p. 59). Massey's Perveen, barred by sex, can only imagine it from outside (Massey, 2018, pp. 22–23). The Parsi club is therefore a threshold that keeps some out in the same gesture by which it lets others in. March's Framji table is where anglicization is most visible and most affectionate: sausage, lamb curry, and saffron rice on one plate, followed by pudding and finger-bowls (March, 2020, p. 152). What a meal can and cannot do is exposed indirectly. Jim recalls complimenting Mrs. Framji "on her crepes," at which "Overcome, Mrs. Framji had broken into sobs. 'Pilloo loved crepes'" (p. 318). The borrowed cuisine has become the medium of the family's most intimate memory. This is what successful incorporation looks like, and it is also why the community's later self-reproach is so painful. Massey's tea tables are more explicitly political. The novel closes at the Taj, where Perveen argues the hotel into serving two unaccompanied women a drink by invoking its own founding principle: "I've heard this magnificent hotel was founded to allow equal hospitality to Indians and foreigners. Is that really true?" (p. 422). Her last act in the book is a claim about who may eat and drink with whom.

Khan's food is post-imperial and knowingly so. At Britannia & Co., "a Parsee restaurant ... run by an Iranian Zoroastrian," Persis orders "a mutton dhansak and the house speciality, chicken berry pilaf" beneath walls hung with "pictures of King George and Gandhi, side by side" (Khan, 2020, p. 75). The Deputy Home Minister of independent India also requires her to take tea with him on precisely the grounds of its imperial provenance: "Tea is one of those British refinements that simply cannot be partaken on one's own" (p. 46). Commensal incorporation into the new nation is therefore transacted, in the new nation's own ministry, through the old empire's beverage. The cost of eating this way is registered in Massey's later *The Bombay Prince*, where a nationalist rioter's taunt is alimentary: "You Parsis love the British! Are you going home to have cake and tea?" (Massey, 2021, as cited in Najeeb, 2026a, p. 788). The rite of incorporation into one world is, through the same act, evidence of betrayal in the other. This is not hybridity's cheerful third space, but what Thomassen means when he insists that the concept be "duly and carefully problematized" (2014, p. 8).

The Rite of Territory: Malabar Hill, the Portal, and the Basement

Van Gennep insisted that "the passage from one social position to another is identified with a territorial passage, such as the entrance into a village or a house, the movement from one room to another, or the crossing of streets and squares" (1909/1960, p. 192). This is identification, not analogy. Parsi in-betweenness is therefore inscribed in Bombay's ground plan. Luhrmann maps it. Parsis live in the once-colonial city, in Malabar Hill, the old Fort area, and Cuffe Parade (1996, p. 31), and their interiors are archives of the passage, holding "the square, solid, responsible furniture of their Victorian past ...

cabinets of English knickknacks with Staffordshire poodles on top” (p. 34). Luhrmann draws the theoretical conclusion herself: the community “seems to have adopted, earlier than other communities, the dictum that the colonial domestication of space indicates a colonial orientation of mind” (pp. 110–111). A memoirist she quotes compresses the picture: “There was a piano at the far end of the room. Often I stood beside it wearing my Lord Fauntleroy suit and, as my aunt played, I sang ‘Rule Britannia!’ Our English guests applauded” (p. 35).

March’s novel opens on a threshold and closes on one. Its first movement is Jim’s approach to Framji Mansion, where “a turbaned gateman disappeared through an ornate door with my calling card” (March, 2020, p. 5). Inside, the drawing room is “a posh room wallpapered in blue, with white molding” in which “a grand piano dominated one side” (p. 42). It is Luhrmann’s Edwardian interior, 60 years earlier. Yet the same house contains an alcove where Burjor “bent his head before” a portrait of Zarathustra “and prayed softly” (p. 122). The domestic space is layered just as the body is layered: the piano in the parlour, the prophet in the alcove. Jim’s position in that house is architecturally exact. In the drawing room he thinks, “I had no place amid this domestic elegance” (p. 42). In the penultimate chapter, he listens to the family at dinner from the foyer: “This was family, but I was not part of it” (p. 368). The novel’s emotional architecture is therefore a doorway.

Massey’s *Bombay* is organized by gendered thresholds. When Perveen arrives at the Farid household, the *durwan*, the gatekeeper, directs her to a different entrance from the one the men use: “But to see the wives, you must go to the zenana entrance. That is the second gate” (Massey, 2018, p. 91). The murder occurs at a *jali* screen, a pierced lattice, described by one of the widows as “a border between our zenana and the main house,” with “an opening ... where we may pass papers and other small things” (pp. 99–100). A crime committed at a threshold designed for the transmission of documents is a particularly literal rendering of van Genneep in fiction. Perveen’s most self-defining line is spoken at that boundary: “Excuse me, Mukri-sahib.’ Perveen enunciated every word to the utmost. ‘I am not in purdah; you should not shout at me like this. I shall come into the main house and speak with you’” (p. 129). She belongs to neither the zenana nor the main house. She claims the right to move between them.

Khan’s geography is sharpest, because by 1950 the hill has become an anomaly: “an acropolis of wealth and power, its inhabitants largely insulated from the whorl of history unfolding around them” (Khan, 2020, p. 33). Her police station is underneath it. Malabar House occupies the basement of a corporation building, a “menagerie of misfits” (p. 34) lodged literally beneath the acropolis. Persis’s own home is the most eloquent Parsi space in the three books. Above her father’s bookshop, “an ornamental frieze displayed both the shop’s name and aggressive scenes from Zoroastrian mythology: fabled birds, white horses and the prophet Zoroaster perched atop a mountain, bathed in holy fire,” flanked by “two stone vultures” (p. 62). She lives beneath an advertisement for a religion she does not practise. These “overtly Parsee emblems” had “bothered her increasingly as she moved towards adulthood” (p. 62). The dwelling is therefore a façade of a faith with a bookshop beneath it: a community whose sacred infrastructure has outlived its congregation.

English Education and the Pivoting of the Sacred

Of all the instruments of the passage these novels reconstruct, English education is the one the community most deliberately chose. “A leading few among the Parsis had early on gauged the potential offered by education in augmenting and broadening or even changing the power base of the community,” so that “the centre of gravity of Parsi influence and power was shifting to the educated” (Palsetia, 2001, pp. 128, 135). Women’s schooling became the community’s own “yardstick for the prodigious pace of both modernization and Westernization among the Parsis” (p. 148), producing some of India’s first professional women, among them the advocate Cornelia Sorabji and the architect Perin Jamsetjee Mistri. By 1901, “more than a quarter of the community spoke English, as compared to less than one percent of the Jains” (Luhrmann, 1996, p. 113).

What such an education produces psychologically is crucial here. Of one informant, Luhrmann writes that the girl “grew up on Jack and Jill, western comic books, and eventually Wordsworth, Byron, and Shelley ... She had felt nostalgic for the Lake District before she ever left India” (1996, p. 47). Pre-emptive nostalgia, homesickness for a place one has never seen, precisely describes van Gennepe’s pivoting of the sacred. “Sacredness as an attribute is not absolute,” he writes; “it is brought into play by the nature of particular situations” (1909/1960, p. 12), so that “whoever passes through the various positions of a lifetime one day sees the sacred where before he has seen the profane, or vice versa” (p. 13). An English education pivots the magic circles: it relocates the sacred to the Lake District and leaves the Bombay street profane.

The novels give this process narrative form. March’s Diana Framji is sent “to finishing school near London” because she “refused to marry, wanted an education” (March, 2020, p. 11). Schooling abroad becomes an alternative to child marriage. The murdered Bacha Framji is characterized forensically by her reading: Shakespeare, Twain, and a curling *Wuthering Heights* (p. 21). The evidence in a Parsi murder is a syllabus, and that syllabus also excludes Jim. When Mrs. Framji asks where he was schooled — ““Oh, whereabouts? Bund Garden or Elphinstone? I grew up in Poona!”” — and he answers, ““Coolwar, Marm. An orphanage run by missionaries,”” the response is a single sentence: “Silence greeted my reply” (p. 78).

In Massey, English legal education is a two-generation family project undertaken explicitly for status: ““Because my grandfather saw this as a way to show status, he sent Pappa to Oxford for his studies”” (Massey, 2018, p. 57). But it makes Perveen illegible at home. Her father rebukes her: ““Is that a European behaviour you learnt at Oxford?”” (p. 15). At the Government Law School, she sits in the back row as a ““special student”” (p. 30). When English education becomes a weapon, it is turned inward against her own community’s purity law. Locked in a menstrual seclusion room by her orthodox mother-in-law and told to understand her ““dirty condition,”” Perveen answers: ““It is called menstruation ... using the English she’d learnt in school. ‘I don’t enjoy it. But it is natural and my own business’”” (p. 186). The colonial classroom supplies the vocabulary with which a Parsi woman refuses a Zoroastrian purity rule. The pivoting of the sacred is performed inside a single sentence.

Khan's Persis inherits this formation and its ambivalence. She is a product of an "Anglo school" in Bombay where "the other girls ... had ostracised her" and "held her down and cut off her plaits" (Khan, 2020, p. 29). This is exclusion rather than admission. Yet she routs the Scottish colonialist Campbell with the words of Boabdil's mother on the loss of Granada (p. 57). Her European learning becomes a weapon aimed at Europeans. At the police training college, "the only woman among a cadre of men," she learned of "the two Indians who had developed the fingerprint classification system," and that "naturally, the credit for the technique had fallen to their English supervisor" (p. 7). The education that gives her authority is the same education that documents its own theft.

Who Wants the Parsi to Be Liminal? The Masters of Ceremony

Thomassen's most consequential observation about modern liminality is that it lacks the officiants that tribal liminality possessed. Modern liminal situations arrive "without clearly defined boundaries of space and time, and without pre-defined masters of ceremony" (2014, p. 99), and "in the absence of masters of ceremony, who should we follow, and who can take the lead out of the crisis?" (p. 103). Szakolczai adds a darker corollary: liminality can be manufactured, because "situations of transition, or crisis, could be artificially provoked" (2017, p. 236). Who, then, wanted the Parsi in the doorway? Four historical agents can be distinguished as masters of separation and classification.

The colonial state needed intermediaries and rewarded them (Palsetia, 2001, p. 48). A British businessman whose recorded memories Luhrmann quotes describes Parsis as "completely westernized in their habits" and acting "as a kind of bridge between Indians and Europeans," before adding: "'Mind you ... we had nice Indians in Bombay'" (1996, p. 113). A bridge is a structure people walk over. March's Jim, questioned over dinner by Home Office guests, understands the arrangement exactly: "If I succeeded, they had much to gain. If I died, they lost nothing" (March, 2020, p. 145). The empire wanted a class that was permanently useful and permanently ineligible: admitted to the Ripon Club, excluded from the British ones, which is why the Ripon Club had to exist at all.

The community's own institutions wanted boundaries enforced. The Parsi Punchayet shaped "the social norms, responsibilities, and obligations that attached to Parsi identity" (Palsetia, 2001, p. 65) before becoming, after 1860, a vehicle of welfare and charity. Vevaina shows what this became: "while the trustees must give to all Parsis, because of the structure of the trust, they also may get to define who is a Parsi," and trust housing "enforce[s] 'proper' Parsi behavior and practice" (2023, pp. 19, 74). This master of ceremony is a landlord. March renders the resulting pressure when Burjor forbids Jim to marry his daughter: "'Young man, you don't understand ... a great deal is at stake! The scandal! The Parsees, my brethren, will cease doing business with us'" (March, 2020, p. 324). The reasoning is demographic: "'if a son or daughter marries someone who is not Parsee, well, they can no longer continue the race. They are as good as lost to us'" (p. 124).

A third party wanted the Parsi in the doorway in order to accuse them of standing there. Nationalist mobilization after 1921 could recast Parsi proximity to the British as collaboration rather than participation, so that the community's visibility both empowered and endangered it. Massey stages the accusation outside a Parsi colony, where Congress youths challenge Perveen for riding in a government car. Indoors, she formulates the sentence that defines the community's twentieth-century position: "There's a misconception that Parsis support the British unconditionally. We have to do better" (2018, p. 84). The novel's most concise emblem of divided allegiance is the family parrot. Perveen's grandfather taught it "God save the Queen" during Victoria's reign, and it has since been taught "*Vande Mataram*," with the result that "she only chirped a random 'Mataram' after a particularly tasty treat" (p. 85). Two anthems occupy one throat, and neither is complete.

Fourth, the community's own men needed its women to remain liminars, and Massey is unequivocal that Parsi custom itself functions as an officiant. Under the Parsi Marriage and Divorce Act of 1865, "a husband's engaging in relations with a prostitute is not cause for divorce or even legal separation" (2018, p. 259). *Binamazi*, the menstrual seclusion that a character argues in open court "orthodox Parsis still practise ... to an extreme" (p. 343), is implicated in the death of a 14-year-old girl in the same house. The servant Gita will say only that "Azara was in binamazi before she died" (p. 184). Anglicization did not exempt Parsi women from Parsi patriarchy; it gave a few of them the English with which to name it.

What no party occupies is the position of the officiant who ends the rite. This is not to say that authority disappeared. The republic and its law, its professions, its universities, and its electoral institutions all incorporate citizens, and Parsis have been conspicuously well placed within them. The question is why none of the available authorities supplies an uncontested incorporation, one that could reconcile communal continuity, national belonging, and postcolonial citizenship at once. The British left; the Panchayet became a landlord; the nation offered incorporation on ambiguous terms. The passage these novels construct has many masters of separation and no uncontested master of incorporation. This, rather than exclusion, is the structural predicament. It is precisely what distinguishes liminality from marginality in Turner's terms: what is missing is "cultural assurance of a final stable resolution" (Turner, 1974, as cited in MacKay & Hadromi-Allouche, 2023, p. 4).

The Ledger of the Threshold: Merits and Demerits

Thomassen insists that liminality "explains nothing. Liminality is. It happens. It takes place. And human beings react to liminal experiences in different ways" (2014, p. 7). What follows is therefore an account of affordances and costs rather than of causes. Four merits can be identified. The first is passage rights. Turner's liminars pass through classifications rather than occupying them, and these novels exploit this professional resource. Perveen may enter the zenana because she is a woman, and the courts because she has studied law at Oxford; her whole practice takes place at boundaries that other people cannot cross. Persis Wadia questions a suspect at the Bombay Gymkhana in the uniform of a state whose predecessor once barred Indians from those rooms. In each case, the resource is not statuslessness but an unstable combination of statuses.

The second is epistemic advantage. This is a possible affordance proposed by the theoretical literature and then tested by the novels, rather than a property that liminality automatically confers. Withdrawal “from the normalizing effect of participation in society” can enable “radical critique ... from the outside” (Miller, 2023, p. 22), just as Kafka’s background “was liminal in such a heightened manner” that it produced “unparalleled insights” (Szakolczai, 2017, pp. 63–64). Turner similarly argues that “liminality, marginality, and structural inferiority are conditions in which are frequently generated myths, symbols, rituals, philosophical systems, and works of art” (1969/1977, p. 128). The corpus can illustrate this claim, but it cannot establish it by itself. The third is *communitas*. March’s dinner-table scene is a small instance of Turner’s “‘moment in and out of time,’ and in and out of secular social structure” (1969/1977, p. 96), in which “Like us, you’re in between” constitutes a category rather than simply describing one. The fourth is institutional creativity. The Parsi charitable trust “has inheritances from three modes of giving (Zoroastrian, Islamic, and English),” which “makes the trust a particularly apt mechanism for those who found it beneficial to follow colonial rules while insisting on managing their own communal affairs” (Vevaina, 2023, pp. 7, 10). Liminality, here, is not a wound but a workshop.

Against these four merits stand four costs. The first is self-condemnation. Luhrmann’s thesis is that “Parsis appropriated the powerful side of the colonialist constructions of India and that it is the unintended consequence of that self-identification which now causes them such grief” (1996, p. viii). Under colonial rule, the good Parsi was “more truthful, more pure, more charitable, more progressive, more rational, and more masculine than the Hindu-of-the-masses” (p. 16). After 1947, the ladder disappeared: “With the absence of the British as the clear tip of the pyramid of power, the self-ascribed position of best-of-all-the-rest no longer existed ... Now, in independent India ... they describe themselves with the critical condemnation the British would have used to describe Hindu others” (p. 16). The result is “a discourse of decay, in which Parsis attack themselves as inadequate — inadequate as Englishmen, inadequate as Indians” (p. 14). Her summary of the double bind deserves quoting in full:

Parsis are Indian and that is bad (they don’t care enough about the community to maintain its purity and assets); they are not Indian and that is bad (they keep to themselves, they don’t allow conversion); they are too western (their westernness has destroyed them); the problem is that they aren’t western enough (if they were more westernized, like their grandparents, they’d work harder). The feelings expressed are contradictory, incompatible, and fervent. (Luhrmann, 1996, p. 49)

This is a four-way indictment in which every position is culpable: a passage without a terminus. Palsetia resists this pathologizing: “beyond the aping of British manners ... the Parsi response is significant for the depth and level of its consequence for Parsi identity” (2001, p. 156). The threshold can therefore be read as work rather than as damage.

The second cost is demographic anxiety. Vevaina, citing Axelrod, reports that “the Parsis of India have experienced one of the most dramatic population declines ever recorded outside of Europe” (2023, p. 84). Luhrmann records the same anxiety — “We are dying out” (1996, p. 110) — and the strange logic through which endogamy is blamed for it: “in Parsi endogamy the blood of the community should be

said to fold in upon itself, implode, and self-destruct” (p. 148). Khan gives Persis the same diagnosis of “their slow waltz to extinction” (2020, p. 25).

The third cost is loneliness, which all three novels name precisely. March’s Jim says: “I had traveled between worlds ... feeling at home in each, as though I had two heartbeats. At the Framjis, east and west blended together, suiting me well. Yet here too I had no place. I would have to make my own” (2020, p. 367). Massey’s Perveen, Bombay’s first woman solicitor, is “still not allowed to present myself before a judge” (2018, p. 273). Khan’s Persis reflects: “It was at times like this that she felt most acutely the loneliness of her pedestal. It was all very well being the nation’s first female IPS officer; but the fact was that she was still the country’s *only* female IPS officer” (2020, p. 116). Firstness is therefore a liminal status: a threshold crossed by one person, with no cohort and no *communitas*.

The fourth cost is vulnerability. Liminal situations are “regarded as dangerous, inauspicious, or polluting,” Turner argues, because “from the perspectival viewpoint of those concerned with the maintenance of ‘structure,’ all sustained manifestations of *communitas* must appear as dangerous and anarchical” (1969/1977, pp. 108–109). Thomassen’s gloss for an ethnic minority sustained at epoch scale is that such groups are “often perceived as both dangerous and ‘holy’” (2014, p. 90). On Malabar Hill, the community’s Towers of Silence occupy some of the most valuable ground in the city, and there the Parsi dead are exposed to birds of prey (Vevaina, 2023). Parsis are, quite literally, both.

Conclusion

These three novels construct Parsi identity not as a hybrid state but as a liminal becoming: a prolonged passage in which separation is repeatedly enacted and incorporation never becomes uncontested. Four claims sustain the reading. First, liminality is not marginality. The Parsi position in these novels is privileged and precarious at once and Thomassen’s insistence that “that which is interstitial is neither marginal nor on the outside” (2014, pp. 7–8) makes it possible to hold prosperity and precarity together rather than treating one as evidence against the other. Second, the materials of anglicization function as ritual technologies rather than as period colour. The *sudreh* beneath the Bond Street linen, *dhansak* on a Wednesday, the piano in the parlour and the prophet in the alcove behind it, and the English word for menstruation turned against a Zoroastrian purity rule are sites of a single process: practices of differentiation that move the community without securing it a new position. Third, the question of the master of ceremony explains why the passage persists. The colonial state wanted intermediaries; communal institutions wanted boundaries; nationalist mobilization wanted a collaborator to name; family law wanted its women in place. None of these supplies an uncontested officiant of incorporation. What endures is therefore not exclusion but the absence of a terminus. Fourth, the threshold has both affordances and costs: passage rights, epistemic advantage, *communitas*, and institutional creativity on one side; self-condemnation, demographic anxiety, loneliness, and vulnerability on the other. Whether liminality “makes a preferable choice” (MacKay & Hadromi-Allouche, 2023, p. 5) the novels answer only contingently – the threshold is resource and burden at once.

Three limits hold here. Liminality is not a synonym for exclusion: interstitiality neither protected the community from discrimination nor cancelled its privilege. Detective closure is not communal incorporation: solving a crime resolves a plot, not a passage, and the analogy drawn here is formal rather than sociological. Fiction is not transparent historical evidence: these are twenty-first-century constructions of colonial and early postcolonial Bombay, and their convergence with Luhrmann's and Palsetia's archives evidences a shared discourse rather than historical accuracy. Liminality is offered here as one analytic instrument among others, not as a master concept that dissolves class, gender, and colonial power into a single threshold.

If the crime novel is a liminal affective technology, then reading it is itself a passage. Zittoun's "looping and proleptic movements" (2021, p. 49) describe the reader's traversal of a world deliberately held between positions, and whether that traversal ends in incorporation or merely extends the transition cannot be settled by literary analysis. That unsettled question is the point. These novels do not only represent Parsi liminality; they require the reader to inhabit its unfinishedness.

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Competing Interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

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Ethics Approval

Not applicable. This study involves no human participants or animal subjects.

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Author Contribution

M.N. contributed to the study's conception and design, methodology, analysis, and main manuscript writing. J.K. contributed through supervision and critical revision of the manuscript. Both authors reviewed and approved the manuscript.

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