

Hariśaṅkar Parsāī's *Ham ek umr se vāqif haim*

A memoir of the sufferings of an Indian literary satirist

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The present work is an attempt at investigating *Ham ek umr se vāqif haim* ('I have known for a lifetime,' 1989), a memoir by Hariśaṅkar Parsāī (1924-1995), commonly deemed as the most outstanding postcolonial Hindī literary satirist (*vyaṅgyakār*). The study aims to explore the narrative strategies as well as the socio-cultural and ideological ends pursued by Parsāī in crafting this work. More precisely, much attention is given to the philosophical views of the writer, who consciously decided to avoid the autobiographical form in his writings. Indeed, he deemed the autobiography (*ātmakathā*) as a genre devoid of any social commitment. On the contrary, he considered memoirs as texts more suitable for conveying ideas on socio-cultural and political issues. Apart from this, considerable emphasis will be placed on the narratives Parsāī developed in this memoir in order to legitimize the value of the satirists, who are authors somehow marginalized by Hindī literary criticism. In order to focus on this issue, the study will engage with the analysis of Parsāī's aesthetic relationship with the representatives of *Nayī Kahānī*, the major Hindī literary movement of the 1950s and 1960s.

Key words: Hindī literature, Hindī literary satire, life writings, memoirs, Hariśaṅkar Parsāī, *Nayī Kahānī*

1. Autobiographies, life writings, and the investigation of marginalized subjects

Undoubtedly, the autobiography (*ātmakathā*) is a leading and expanding field of Hindī contemporary literature. Nevertheless, after a long period of marginalization of autobiographies as readable texts in Indian academia, Hindī critical studies began stressing upon the relevance of the autobiography only in the mid-1990s. In the same period, Hindī literary production started to develop more broadly. This is proven by the fact that Rājendra Yādav (1929-2013), a leading figure of the *Nayī Kahānī* ('New short stories') literary movement in the 1950s, deemed the task of publishing autobiographies by Ādivāsī and

Dalit¹ writers as the main goal of *Hamis*,² a magazine he himself re-established in 1986 (Brueck 2014: 3).³ After all, since the end of the 1980s and the early 1990s, with the help of such ideological and editorial patronage, many Indian writers belonging to the above mentioned communities used autobiographies as literary artefacts to narrate their state of marginalization in Indian society.⁴ Furthermore, even outside literatures in Indian languages, the autobiography is usually deemed, especially in postcolonial contexts, as a genre which has often been used by “marginalized subjects” (Smith-Watson 2010) in order to contest mainstream narratives. Nonetheless, it cannot be neglected that the epistemological categories used by scholars who investigated autobiographies have been deeply criticized in the past. Primarily, it has been stressed that some theoretical concessions have been granted to autobiographical texts for their alleged socio-cultural and political value (De Man 1979: 919). Moreover, it has been contended that the autobiography should not be deemed as a genre but, rather, as “an ambiguous mode of self-assertion” (Eakin 1992: 88) which can be detected in more than one literary and extra-literary fields. Moreover, it has also been outlined that “autobiographic occasions” have to be seen as “dynamic sites” for performance (Smith 1995: 214) of the subjectivity. Therefore, given the hardship in establishing the boundaries of autobiography, recent studies preferred the umbrella term “life writings,”⁵ which is a broader classification encompassing texts, such as the memoirs, which will be investigated in the present study.

¹ Dalit literature developed at the beginning of 1970s, in the context of Marāṭhī literature, especially through the interventions of the Dalit panthers, the latter being inspired by the political thought of the Black panthers, by Bhīmrāo Rāmji Āmbēḍkar (1891-1956), as well as by the principles of Marxist ideology. Beginning from the 1990s, a new generation of writers, including Omprakāś Valmikī (1950-2013), Mohandās Naimiśrāy and so on, introduced a Dalit literary stream in Hindī literature (Brueck 2014; Hunt 2014). More recently, especially through the commitment of writers such as Jasintā Kerkeṭṭa and Nirmalā Putul, Hindī literary production has developed through the rise of a distinct Ādivāsī literary stream (Consolaro 2018).

² *Hamis* was founded, in 1930, by Dhanpat Rāi Śrīvāstav ‘Premcand’ (1880-1936), a main Hindī writer, literary critic, and publisher of the first half of the 20th century. After Premcand’s death in 1936, during the 1940s and the 1950s, the magazine went under the editorial direction of many progressive Hindī writers. For a study of the impact of progressive ideas on this magazine during this period (Mangraviti 2021).

³ It must be also taken into consideration that, before engaging in the publication of these works, this literary magazine had already contributed to the promotion of autobiographical writings by other literatures. This is proven, e.g., by the publication of many Hindī translations of Marāṭhī autobiographies. For a comprehensive study see (Hunt 2004).

⁴ With reference to Hindī literature, the first Dalit autobiographies were written by Mohandās Naimiśrāy (1995) and Omprakāś Valmikī (1997).

⁵ There has been much debate about the relationship of the literary form of life writings with autobiographies. The latter are usually deemed as the main form of life writings or, otherwise, as just one of the many forms that life writings can practically embody. Following the current interpretation of the concept of life writings, they are intended as being part of a macro-genre, which covers texts such as autobiographies, memoirs, letters, biographies, and essays. Indeed, all these texts, although being

In this light, it is relevant to emphasize at the outset that the present study, which aims to explore the field of Hindī life writings, is determined by two main interests. Primarily, the study of life writings has proven to be relevant for the investigation of a number of socio-cultural and political events and processes, which transpired in India during the 19th and 20th centuries. As a matter of fact, since the colonial period, many writers, although being rather “reticent” in adopting the autobiography (Browarczyk 2020), used other forms of life writings to unfold their memories. This tendency strengthened during the 1990s. Indeed, since this period, a raising number of authors used these texts to narrate their social marginalization; further, they used them as tools to raise awareness about their ideological and political claims. Apart from such functions, there is another feature that is of great relevance to the present work. Indeed, life writings provided the authors the opportunity to experiment with innovative and creative forms and registers; and, not by chance, many autobiographers were artists who were engaged in many other extra-literary fields. For instance, previous studies have proven the use of life writings by representatives of the Parsi⁶ theatre for several personal and creative aims at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries (Hansen 2011). If this was not enough, recently, a somewhat similar task has been pursued by Consolaro (2020), who investigated the autobiography of the famous Indian contemporary painter Maqbūl Fidā Husain (1915-2011).⁷ Building on previous studies, the present work aims to establish the relationship of life writings with literary satire (*vyāṅgya*), to be considered, no less than autobiography, a genre (Declercq 2019) and/or an expressive mode with magmatic and parasitic characters (Guillhamet 1987; Harder 2011: 165-166). This study aims to be the first attempt at investigating the intertwining between these different literary fields against the backdrop of *Ham ek umr se vāqif haim* (‘I have known for a lifetime,’ 1989), a Hindī memoir by the well-known Indian literary satirist Hariśankar Parsāi (1924-1995). The relationship between these fields, which has already been studied with regard to other literary contexts (Kean 2022; Kinzel 2013), is, at least with reference to Hindī literature, a subject that has never investigated before. Apart from this and starting from these assumptions, the survey also aims to explore some of the socio-cultural and ideological issues linked to the status of the satirist in contemporary India.

different in many respects, are sources from which it is possible to draw recorded personal and individual information about identity of the writer (Eckerle 2010; Smith-Watson 2017).

⁶ It is a type of theatre that developed in India between the mid-19th and the first half of the 20th centuries. Originally established in central-eastern India, it spread to northern India in the period between the two centuries. Its driving force ended abruptly in the 1930s, also due to the formation and spread of the film industry in India.

⁷ A painter whose style is often compared to Picasso’s cubism.

2. The status of Hindī satire: from the 1950s to present times

Before going through the study of *Ham ek umr se vāqif haiṁ*, it is relevant to introduce the author of this memoir as well as the status of satirists in contemporary India. Parsāi is considered as one of the torchbearers of Hindī literature in the period following India's independence. He began writing in the first half of the 1950s. Along with other writers of the same period, such as Mannū Bhaṅḍārī (1931-2021), Kamleśvar Prasād Saksenā (1932-2007), Mohan Rākeś (1925-1972), and so on, he contributed to the aesthetic renewal of Hindī literature which, in the mid-1950s, culminated in the *Nayī Kahānī*.⁸ Parsāi stood out as a versatile, eclectic, and controversial literary author, who contributed to the field by writing a great number of satirical sketches. Most of them were published in literary magazines, such as *Vasudhā* and *Sārikā*, well known for their progressive and Marxist orientation. It is, however, worth saying that Parsāi was also engaged in the writing of short stories (*kahānī*) and novels (*upanyās*), quite often inspired by motifs drawn from Indian mythology or having much in common with science fiction and detective novels.⁹ After a long period of apprenticeship, characterized by his militancy and activism in the Communist Party of India (CPI), Parsāi was officially recognized for his literary merits in 1982, when he was awarded the prestigious Sāhitya Akādāmī Puraskār.¹⁰ Parsāi's intellectual and artistic career, as this brief biographical profile points out, seems to be rather conventional in hindsight. Apart from Parsāi, there were many other Hindī literary authors who, after having expressed radical positions in the phase which preceded India's independence, were progressively assimilated by cultural institutions close to the Indian National Congress (INC). Parsāi as a literary figure, however, stands out for reasons beyond the strictly political value of his work. He, indeed, was a writer who has undergone a process of marginalization by Hindī literary criticism within the limited boundaries of the satirical genre.¹¹ Since the long history of prestige and marginalization, at the same

⁸ It is a literary stream, which developed between the 1950s and the 1960s. One specific feature of it consists of the use by writers of the genre of short stories with the purpose of narrating in a vivid and, sometimes, grotesque and disenchanted way the postcolonial social and political context in India. For a study see (De Brujin 2017).

⁹ Among the works with mythological ingredients it is worth mentioning, for example, the novel *Rānī Nāgfani kī kahānī* ('The tale of Queen Nāgfani,' 1961) and the short story *Bholārām kā jīv* ('The soul of Bholārām,' 1954). Further, imaginary elements (*kālpnik*) linked to the narration of historical events can also be traced in the imaginary interviews (*kālpnik sāksāṭkār*) between Kabīr and contemporary historical figures, published between 1974 and 1976 in the literary column, *Kabīr kharā bazār merī* ('Kabīr stands in the market').

¹⁰ A literary prize that has been awarded annually since 1954 to authors writing in different Indian languages. It is considered the most important Indian literary prize.

¹¹ As we will see in Section 'Against the mainstream or assimilated within it?' this satirist himself outlined this status by adopting in his memoir the expression *darkinār karnā*, which can be translated as "to marginalize" or "to put on the borders" (2018 [1989]: 105).

time, of the satirical form in Hindī literature would deserve a diachronic analysis, the present study will limit itself to a brief overview of the development of literary satire in the 20th century.

Usually, the roots of satire in Hindī literature are traced back to the 1870s and 1880s (Harder 2011: 165). After a phase of partial stagnation during the 1920s and 1930s, in the period following independence, Hindī literary satire was fundamentally re-molded from an aesthetic as well as an ideological point of view. This work of restyling of Hindī satire was not due exclusively to Parsāī's activity, but was the outcome of the joint action of a new class of satirists, such as Śarad Jośī (1931-1991), Śrīlāl Śukla (1925-2011), and so on. These authors, according to Saksenā Prasād Kamleśvar (1932-2007), who expressed some sketchy ideas on satire in the long essay *Nayī Kahānī kī bhūmikā* ('Introduction to *Nayī Kahānī*,' 1966), embodied the contradictions (*visangati*) of this era, characterized by a sense of disillusionment (*moh bhaṅg*) towards the Indian state and its institutions (Kamleśvar 1966: 16). It would, however, be overtly partial to conceive of Hindī satire as a genre with rigidly demarcated boundaries in the postcolonial period. Indeed, an overall glance at the Hindī literary works of these years would be sufficient to discover traces of the satirical mode in many literary and extra-literary contexts. It should be taken into consideration, to mention some examples drawn from famous books of the 1950s, the adoption of the literary *topos* of the false saints in the *Mailā āncal* ('The Soiled Border,' 1954) by Phaṇīśvarnāth Reṇu (1921-1977) as well as in Kamleśvar's *Ek saṛak sattāvan galiyām* ('One street and fifty-six alleys,' 1956). Further, in *Mailā āncal*, a work which is usually linked to the regionalist (*āncalik*) strand of Hindī literature, we can find a grotesque and caricatural picture of the representatives of Indian political parties (Pandey 1974: 88-92). Therefore, the satirical ingredient is an expressive register which was used in an articulated and obliquitous way in many literary fields of the 1950s and 1960s. Later, since the 1990s, in parallel with the aesthetic renewal which affected Hindī literature during this phase, the function of satire and the status accorded to satirists in the Hindī public sphere changed. Some authors, such as Narendra Kohlī (1940-2021), by pursuing the aesthetic path paved by Parsāī, wrote a number of works displaying the connection between satire and postmodern issues (Ghirardi 2018; 2021). Other less known authors, for example Suryābalā, attempted at mixing classic themes of Hindī literary satire with contemporary socio-cultural and political issues.

According to Phiddian (2013), who has highlighted the limits of the studies on satire which are based on merely formalist approaches, in any literary context it would be convenient to re-construct the ties of literary satire to a number of other performative contexts in which satire can be detected. Given the limited space which can be provided in this article to the analysis of the 'life' of satire beyond the literary sphere, it will be enough to recall that, especially in the 1960s and 1970s, a number of satirists and humorists performed their lyrics during the *Hāsya kavī sammelan* ('Gatherings of humorist poets')

which were annually held in many cities of North India.¹² At that time, therefore, there was not a clear-cut division between satirical literature and performance: both were deemed as complementary ingredients. These gatherings, however, especially since the 1990s, were subject to process of liberalization which radically changed their function in Indian context. For these reasons, many satirical performances were broadcasted on Indian television channels and, in this way, played an ambiguous – and still unexplored – ideological role in the molding of Hindi contemporary public sphere. It must be also taken into account that, nowadays, many authors use stand-up comedy – which is also one of the most common performative forms of satire (De Clerq 2021: 13) – as a tool for raising a number of criticisms at the Indian cultural and political mainstream (Nüske 2018). An interesting fact in reference to the rise of Hindī/Hinglish stand-up comedy as peculiar form of contemporary satire is that, in some cases, even subjects belonging to marginalized communities began using this tool.¹³

3. Parsāi's neglect of the autobiography and his preference for the memoir

Officially, Parsāi has never authored any work which could be credited as an autobiography. Nevertheless, considering his literary production as a whole, it is evident that he crafted a number of works with ingredients which can be linked to the field of life writings. Primarily, it should be considered that, besides *Ham ek umr se vāqif hairī*, Parsāi wrote many other lesser-known memoirs. Furthermore, he released two interviews in which he talked, in an extensive way, about his aesthetic, philosophical, and political ideas concerning satire. Finally, several semi-autobiographical elements could be drawn from a number of works Parsāi authored during his long and eventful literary career. Not less significant is the fact that Parsāi expressed great interest for many early-modern North-Indian poets. A specific aesthetic feature of Parsāi's works is that, quite often, the satirist embodied these classical authors as alter egos of himself; indeed, he projected on them in an oblique manner many of his own experiences, memories, and even his philosophical and ideological views.¹⁴ Therefore, all these

¹² Parsāi wrote about the socio-cultural relevance of these poetic gatherings in the essay *Hindī kavi sammelan*, published on the literary magazine *Vasudhā* in April 1957. In this occasion, more marginally, the satirist reflected also on the deep connection between the tasks pursued by the actor (*abhinētā*) and the singer (*gāyāk*) and those pursued, in the literary sphere, by poets (*kavi*) attending these events (Parsāi 1985: 161-163).

¹³ This, for instance, is the case of Dīpikā Mhatre, a stand-up comedian performing in Hindī who, in 2018, became famous for her mocking of the 'madams' in whose homes she worked as a domestic help (Shivaprasad 2020).

¹⁴ Among the works that can be associated with the genre of the memoirs, remember *Tircī rekhāem* ('Lines oblique,' 2000). The satirist's two interviews, released in the 1980s and entitled *Jñānrañjan dvārā lambī bātcīt* ('A long interview by Jñānrañjan') and *Śyāmsundar Mīśra se carcā* ('A conversation in company of Śyāmsundar Mīśra'), were included in the sixth volume of *Parsāi racnāvalī* (1985). Equally relevant are works, such as *Tulsīdās candan gisaim* ('Tulsīdās applied sandalwood oil,' 1986), where

works, not differently from *Ham ek umr se vāqif hairī*, could be deemed as life writings. With reference to this work, the satirist considered it as a memoir.

आत्मकथा नहीं लिखूंगा। लोग यह मानते हैं कि आत्मकथा में सच छिपा लिया जाता है। जो व्यक्तित्व को महिमा दे, वही लिखा जाता है। मगर हर सच को लिखने की ज़रूरत भी क्यों है? अपनी हर टुच्ची हरकत का बयान आखिर क्यों करूँ? उस टुच्ची हरकत का क्या महत्त्व है, पाठकों के लिए? कोई उसका सामाजिक मूल्य है क्या? नहीं है।

I will not write an autobiography. People believe that the truth is hidden in the autobiography. There, you will find just what is written to give relevance to someone's personality. What need is there to narrate every truth anyway? After all, why should I talk about each of my most insignificant gestures? What is the function of doing this, is it of any use to the readers? Does it have any social significance? Certainly not (Parsāi 2018 [1989]: 11).¹⁵

बहरहाल संस्मरण लिखूंगा। मैं कम होऊंगा, मेरे साथ बदलता ज़माना ज़्यादा होगा। लोग आत्मकथा और संस्मरण करते हैं की हम सीखेंगे और हमें सही रास्ता मिलेगा। अपने और दूसरे के अनुभव से आदमी ज़रूर सीखता है, पर रास्ते अलग अलग होते हैं।

Therefore, I will write a memoir. In this work, I will be diminished and give greater space to the narration of the times that have changed with me. When the people read an autobiography or a memoir, they hope to learn something from it and, by doing so, to take the right way. The human being certainly learns from his own experiences and from those of others, but the paths taken are totally heterogeneous (Parsāi 2018 [1989]: 12).

This memoir, whose title is inspired by the verses of the well-known Urdu poet Faiz Ahmad Faiz (1911-1984),¹⁶ “will recall the experience of the battles fought in the course of a lifetime, the bitterness, the offenses and the harrassments, the injustices and the hardships” (जीवन संघर्ष के अनुभव, कड़ुवाहट, अपमान और उत्पीड़न, अन्याय, यातना की स्मृतियाँ होगी; Parsāi 2018 [1989]: 9). Moreover, it serves to preserve the “memories of

Parsāi described in detail his intellectual and literary path and almost all the introductions this author added to his literary anthologies.

¹⁵ All the translations are mine.

¹⁶ The title, as explained by the satirist at the beginning of the memoir, is inspired by the verses: “I have known for a lifetime, do not explain now to me what is pleasure, my beloved, and what is oppression” (हम इक उम्र से वाकिफ हैं अब न समझाओ के लुत्फ क्या है मेरे मेहरबाँ सितम क्या है; Parsāi 2018 [1989]: 9), extracted from Faiz Ahmad Faiz's poem *Bahut milā na milā* ('Whether one received a lot or not'). It is interesting to note that, apart from the sharing of the same ideological ideals, Faiz and Parsāi show the same tendency at intertwining in their works political and existentialist themes. Another author who inspired this memoir was Bālkr̥ṣṇa Śarmā 'Navīn' (1897-1960), an Indian freedom activist, journalist and politician who played also a major role in the literary field.

living and struggling by ingesting poison” (विष को पचाकर जीने और लड़ने की स्मृति; Parsāi 2018 [1989]: 9). Here, the underlying philosophical and aesthetic orientation of this memoir can be clearly discerned. Parsāi, even more than Kunwar Nārāyaṅ (1927-2017) and other literary representatives of his time (Browarczyk 2020: 25), expresses skepticism towards the social (*sāmājīk*) function of the autobiography (Parsāi 2018 [1989], 12). This negative assessment is, probably, based on some prejudice towards autobiography as a literary genre. Indeed, by adopting a cliché on autobiography which has been deeply questioned by recent studies (Isaak 2001), Parsāi blames autobiographies for being the outcome of narcissistic ambitions of their own authors. This idea is not new to Hindī literary criticism. Indeed, in the 1920s and 1930s, Rām Candra Śukla (1884-1941), one of the first professional literary critics, had moved similar criticisms at avant-garde poets for projecting on their poetry individualist feelings and aspirations (Wakankar 2002: 998). Also Nārāyaṅ, in a more subtle way, expressed similar ideas in his literary essays (Browarczyk 2020: 23). However, apart from this moral reason there were other, more aesthetic and ideological reasons for which Parsāi discards autobiography. Primarily, he criticizes autobiographies by adopting a formalist perspective. Indeed, he considers them as texts which, by covering the author's whole life and by following a strict chronological order of the narrated facts, in many cases focus on events that are meaningless from an historical perspective. Conversely, he considers the memoirs, given their scattered and not chronological character, as more dynamic and useful tools for establishing the connection of one life with the socio-cultural dynamics and processes which affected contemporary history. The difference between memoir and autobiography, as recently outlined by the novelist Gāyatrī Prabhu, cannot be easily drawn. However, one general assumption which can be adopted, even in reference to Parsāi's work, is that “more than autobiography, the memoir can be selective about the memories it showcase, the form it uses to recast these memories, and the insistence of the fullness of this partial view” (Prabhu 2018).

At the same time, it must not be neglected that Parsāi's assessment on the limits of the autobiography – and, more generally, on the limits of all the life writings – is based on the epistemological assumption for which these writings are unable to provide immutable truths and teachings to the reader. Parsāi's indifference for any historicist dogmatism, which characterizes his whole literary production, seems to anticipate the categories of postmodernist thought, which is skeptical towards any kind of ontology (Hutcheon 1988). Significantly, this point of view, even outside Hindī literature, is widely shared by other satirical authors, especially by those who believe that any re-construction of memories necessarily implies “a remodeling and reorganization of specific events, situations, and conversations” (Steinberg 2001: 16-17). Satire, after all, is also a disposition which is

held by the satirist in order to pursue a philosophical investigation of categories commonly used for the interpretation of the events (Diehl 2013).

It is also pertinent to point out that Parsāī's memoir, while it was being written during the second half of the 1980s, was not extraneous to the sense of disillusionment which, since the 1950s, has provided the creative background for Hindī avant-garde literature. This element can be easily detected in many pages of the memoir, especially where the satirist expresses negative and nihilistic views about life. Nevertheless, stressing just this skeptical nuance of Parsāī's work would contribute to a partial and incomplete picture. Indeed, the memoir is also characterized by the search for new paths to follow, be it aesthetic or philosophical, in order to interrogate history and memory. From this view, it appears that the choice of writing a memoir instead of an autobiography emerged from the ideological task of narrating – even if filtered through such skeptical attitudes – the main features of the age in which the satirist lived. At the same time, it is evident that, by doing so, the satirist filled a marked psychological gap – that of narrating the hardships he faced in order to be accepted as an authoritative writer and intellectual by other representatives of Hindī literature. Such a psychological function is, quite often, inherent to autobiographies written in other literary contexts by satirists. Of course, it has been common for many authors to use life writings in order to 'cure' themselves, by narrating their own memory (Concepcion 2018, Dapra 2013). Parsāī's work, therefore, is not an exception. Indeed, although the satirist plans, in the introduction, to avoid writing a work with subjective and individualistic aims, his memoir, if taken as a whole, is not devoid of these elements. Indeed, these aims are somewhat inherent to his ambition, as a author who considers himself marginal within the Hindī literary sphere, to legitimize his value by narrating many of the encounters and quarrels during his career. What is relevant on the formal level is that the writing of a memoir by a satirist entailed also the crafting of innovative expressive strategies. Therefore, satire itself is not only the narrative subject of the memoir: it is also the medium used by the author for narratives. Primarily, this is shown by the presence in the memoir of some word puns. Moreover, without a doubt, a satirical characterization can be found in the sections in which Parsāī remembers, with feelings of pride and disdain, the publishers who had discouraged him from cultivating his talent, when he was still a novice writer, and to whom, once he attained literary fame, he refused to deliver his own text for publication:

आपको पुस्तक देने में क्या फायदा। बिक्री आपकी बहुत कम है। मुझे क्या रायल्टी मिलेगी? एक तरह से किताब कुँए में डालना ही होगा। यह 'जानत अपनों मोल' का रहस्य है।

How do I benefit from giving my book to you? Your sale is extremely poor. What will my royalty percentage be? By accepting it, I would waste my work. This is the secret behind the saying 'know your worth' (Parsāi 2018 [1989]: 11).

His reflections on Kṛṣṇamūrti (1895-1986)¹⁷ are also characterized by an explosive satirical verve. He is represented, in deference to a recurring topos in modern Indian literatures since the 19th century, as a false mystic who is engaged in giving moral precepts to his fellow men (Parsāi 2018 [1989]: 12).

4. Literary and political engagements of an unconventional thinker

The affiliation of Parsāi to the INC and, more generally, to the socialist and Marxist political groups operating in India, beginning from the post-independence period, has already been underlined. This relationship, as noted in the past (Mangraviti 2020: 92-95), was pervaded by elements of deep ideological ambiguity. It must, however, be noted that these trajectories affected the work of most of the authors writing in Hindī in the aftermath of independence. Indeed, these often appeared to be suspended between a proclaimed and idealized political radicalism on the one hand and, on the other, the participation in many cultural activities promoted by state institutions, such as the Sāhitya Akādemi, close to the ends of the INC (Husain 2011). In Parsāi, however, these contradictions are even more marked. It is, indeed, paradoxical that the INC, blamed since the 1950s by the satirist for being a party pervaded by corruption (*bhraṣṭācār*) and nepotism (*bhāi bhatijāvād*; Mangraviti 2020: 67), sponsored Parsāi's work since the early 1980s. This sponsorship by the government was not accidental: it played a role in the longue durée normalization of the latter. Indeed, even today, some works of Parsāi, particularly those belonging to his pedagogical literary production, are included in many school curricula. *Ham ek umr se vāqif haiṁ*, published in 1989, is somewhat affected by these tendencies of normalization. Indeed, this work seems to be characterized by the same feeling of disaffection towards politics which imbued the anthology *Tulsīdās candan gisaiṁ*, issued just four years after Parsāi's receiving of the Sāhitya Akādami Puraskār. However, it must be emphasized that, here, Parsāi highlighted quite liberally his political and ideological affiliation with the CPI during his youth. He wrote: "I was a socialist activist (*āndolankāri*) and, only later, did I also become a writer. I started writing through politics" (मैं समाजवादी आंदोलनकारी पहले था और लेखक बाद में हुआ. लेखन के क्षेत्र में मैं राजनीति के मार्फित ही आया; Parsāi 2018 [1989]: 68). The union between these two dimensions was deliberately emphasized by the author in the account of the years spent, as a teacher, in Jabalpur; further, it is stressed in the narration of his

¹⁷ A philosopher and writer whose thought was deeply affected by the impact of the Theosophical Society.

experiences as a columnist with *Vasudhā* alongside the Marxist poet Gajānan Mādhav Muktibodh (1917-1964), his longtime friend and political comrade. For Parsāi, the political dimension is a necessity rather than a real choice: “Writers who argue that the writer should not have anything to do with politics are deplorable representatives of right-handed tendencies, reactionaries, and preachers of the status quo” (जो लेखक कहते हैं कि लेखक को राजनीति से कोई मतलब नहीं, वे खुद बहुत घृणित दक्षिणपंथी, प्रक्रियावादी, यथेष्टीतिवादी राजनीति के प्रचारक हैं; Parsāi 2018 [1989]: 68). This perspective is paradoxically combined with the aspiration to be considered as an independent author, not dogmatically tied to or aligned purely to partisan and sectarian Marxism. For Parsāi, in fact, as he manifests in one of the short stories of *Tulsīdās candan gisairī*, the Marxist revolution constitutes more of a utopian ideal than a political project, which can be effectively realized in the context of Indian society (Mangraviti 2020: 92-93). Indeed, in the Indian context, according to Parsāi, the Marxist ideal is comparable to Rām Rājya, the ideal and religious-based Kingdom of Rāma as described by Tulsīdās in the *Rām carit mānas*. In the light of the above, in this memoir, the choice of political personalities to whom the satirist decided to convey his esteem and consideration confirms this unconventional path towards Marxism. This is shown by the description of Narendra Dev (1889-1956),¹⁸ a point of reference for Parsāi's intellectual and political development from the second half of the 1940s, described as an unconventional and highly polemical political personality.

आचार्य जी स्पष्ट घोषण करते थे कि मैं मार्क्सवादी हूँ पर वे चिंतक थे और यूरोप में प्रचलित मूल मार्क्सवादी सिद्धांत एवं कार्यप्रणाली को भारतीय संस्कृति, जनमानस और भारतीय परिशतितियों में जैसा का तैसा स्वीकार नहीं करना चाहते थे। वे भारतीयता पर आधारित मार्क्सवाद को स्वीकार करते थे और उस पर उन्होंने सैद्धांतिक पुस्तकें भी लिखीं। वे बौद्ध धर्म के विद्वान् थे और उससे प्रभावित थे। ये तरुण समाजवादी जिनके नेता जयप्रकाश नारायण, राममनोहर लोहिया, अशोक मेहता, अरुणा आसफ अली थे, १९४२ के 'अंग्रेजो भारत छोड़ो' आंदोलन के हीरो थे। स्थानीय से अखिल भारतीय स्तर तक इनके प्रति युवकों का ख़ास आकर्षण था। ये बड़े क्रांतिकार माने जाते थे। इनका बोलना और लिखना उग्र हो गया था। ऐसा लगता था, जैसे ये देश को उलट पलटकर रख देंगे।

The Ācārya claimed to be a Marxist. However, he was an intellectual and he did not accept in the context of Indian culture, popular awareness, and historical situation the doctrine and the modus operandi that characterized Marxist ideology in Europe. He believed in a Marxism based on Indianness. He had also written some doctrinal essays in which he addressed this issue. He was a Buddhist scholar and was influenced by this thought. Young socialists such as Jayprakāś Nārāyaṇ, Rāmmanohar Lohiyā, Aśok Mehtā, Aruṇā Āsaf Alī were the heroes of the Quit India Movement of 1942. From the provinces to the national level, the attraction they held for young people was great. They were seen as great

¹⁸ He was one of the main exponents of the Congress Socialist Party in the period preceding and immediately following India's independence. He stood out for a basically spiritual and revolutionary vision and for his interest in the cultural dimension. In the period between 1951 and 1954, he was appointed as the Vice Chancellor at the Banaras Hindu University.

revolutionaries. Their way of speaking and writing was extremely aggressive. It looked like they were going to turn the country upside down (Parsāi 2018 [1989]: 68).

5. Against the mainstream or assimilated within it?

A decisive period for Parsāi's training as a writer was the one he spent in the city of Jabalpur at the turn of the 1940s and 1950s. It was in these years that this satirist developed, largely inspired by his own political models, a critical attitude towards the Indian political establishment and, particularly, towards the INC. Indeed, since those days, by writing columns for many journals, Parsāi faced a number of aesthetic and intellectual troubles with many Hindī literary critics, quite often suspicious towards the value of satire as a literary form worth being described as literature.

मैंने शुरू से ही साहित्यशास्त्र के कोई बंधन नहीं माने, आचार्यों के चौखटे तोड़ डाले। मेरी लिखी हुई यह अगर कहानी नहीं मानते, तो परिभाषा बदल दो। यही नहीं, मुझे काफी जड़, दक्कियानूस, कट्टर, अविवेकी शास्त्रियों से भी लड़ाई लड़नी पड़ी। न ये नई वास्तविकता को ग्रहण कर सकते हैं, न नया सोच सकते हैं। दर्शन के फाटक पर चौकीदार बने बैठे हैं और दिनभर मक्खी उड़ाने की रोटी खाते हैं।

Since I started, I have never given importance to any of the rules imposed by literary criticism. I have broken the diktats imposed by the masters. If you do not consider what I write as short stories, please change your classification. And, if it is not enough, you should know that I had to fight with stupid, backward, dumb, and ignorant literary critics. They were neither able to grasp the new reality nor could they understand new ideas. They sit as watchmen at the gate of philosophy and make their living through sycophancy (Parsāi 2018 [1989]: 10).

Here, the criticism of the Indian academy and, more generally, of the scholars committed to Indian cultural institutions is quite strong. Moreover, this kind of criticism is present, even outside this memoir, in many other works produced by this satirist. Other passages which can be found in this memoir, however, are less aggressive and suggest Parsāi's desire for a further formal recognition from the Indian readers as well from the institutions involved in the political and cultural fields. Many evidences that strengthen this interpretation can be ascertained in the central part of the memoir, particularly in the chapters where Parsāi recalls the cultural and political meetings and events he joined during his career. A central part of these descriptions is the narration of the encounters he had with many literary authors. With the same attention to satirical detail, the author lingers in the narration on the ideological and aesthetic quarrels that emerged around the mid-1960s, a period which was characterized in the political sphere by the end of the leadership of Javāharlāl Nehrū (1889-1964) and, in the literary field, by the exhaustion of the propulsive phase of the *Nayī Kahānī*. The *Sāhitya*

Sammelan and, in the poetic field, the Kavī Sammelan, were events attended by Hindī writers and, significantly, the space where the frameworks for discussions was drawn out.¹⁹ Great narrative spaces are reserved for the encounters the satirist had before and after Muktibodh's funeral, which is presented to the reader as a moment of symbolic value in the process of Parsāi's recognition as a relevant literary author. Finally, great attention is paid to recalling the words of appreciation expressed by colleagues.

सुमित्रानंदन पंत से एक बार छोटी सी भेंट हुई। मुक्तिबोध का पुत्र दिल्ली से पिता की अस्थियाँ लेकर प्रयाग आया। साथ शमशेर बहादुर सिंह और मैं थे। शाम को बेसेंट हॉल में शोकसभा हुई। सभा खत्म होने पर पंत जी मेरे पास आए और बोले: “‘मैं भी आपका प्रशंसक हूँ, ‘कल्पना’ में आपका कालम जरूर पढ़ता हूँ”। मैं तब ‘कल्पना’ में ‘और अंत में’ स्तम्भ नियमित लिखता था। यह पत्रिका के अंत के पृष्ठों में होता था। धर्मवीर भारती ने कहा था: “आपके कारण ‘कल्पना’ को शुरू से नहीं, अंत से पढ़ना आरम्भ करते हैं”।

On one occasion, I had a very brief meeting with Sumitrānandan Pant. Muktibodh's son had gone from Delhi to Prayag with his father's ashes. With him were Śāmśer Bahādur Simh and I. In the evening, there was a condolence meeting in Besant Hall. When the meeting ended, Pant jī came up to me and said: “I am your admirer! I read regularly your column in *Kalpanā*!” In those days, in fact, I regularly wrote columns in both *Kalpanā* and *Aur ant mein*. These were always found on the back pages of such magazines. Dharmvīr Bhārati also told me: “Because of you, I read *Kalpanā* never starting from the beginning but from the end” (Parsāi 2018 [1989]: 102).

अमरकांत ने मुझसे कहा कि आपसे यशपाल जी मिलना चाहते हैं। मैं गया। यशपाल घास पर बैठे थे। मुझे देखते ही हाथ जोड़कर झुककर बोले: “अरे महाराज, महाराज, मैं कब से आपसे मिलने को उत्सुक हूँ”। मैं थोड़े असमंजस में पड़ा। मैंने बहुत नम्रता से कुछ बातें कहीं। बस! दूसरी मुलाकात हुई लखनऊ में। उत्तरप्रदेश साहित्य परिषद् का पुरस्कार लेने मैं गया था। पुरस्कार यशपाल को भी मिला था। बड़े हॉल में यशपाल की और मेरी कुर्सीं लगी हुई थीं।

Amarkānt told me that Yaśpāl wanted to meet me. I went there. Yaśpāl was sitting on the grass. As soon as he saw me, he folded his hands, bowed and said: “Oh, Mahārāja, Mahārāja, I have long wanted to meet you!” I was confused. I said something with great humility. And nothing else! We met again in Lucknow. I had come to receive an award issued by Uttar Pradeś Sāhitya Pariṣad. Yaśpāl had also received the award. In the great hall, my chair was placed next to Yaśpāl's (Parsāi 2018 [1989]: 104).

¹⁹ It is important to outline that, as generally pointed out in the studies on autobiography, the space, along with the time, is one of the most crucial points of every autobiographical account. Space and time, indeed, are two ingredients which are consciously or unconsciously assessed by the narrator in order to highlight the tendencies which reinforced or, on the contrary, produced the alteration and the transformation of the narrator's identity (Smith-Watson 1996).

The reference to the meetings of the satirist with many Marxist-oriented writers of the 1920s and 1930s stems from his desire to legitimize his role as a man of letters. Nevertheless, Parsāī's preferential link with the previous generation of Hindī writers does not exclusively have an emotional and ideological matrix. In fact, more than other representatives of the 1950s and 1960s, the satirist adopts in many works the classical values and symbols that had characterized Hindī literature during the first half of the 20th century. In particular, Parsāī is distinguished by the re-assessment of historical, literary, and poetic values drawn from the devotional literature of the early-modern period, with a predilection for the poetry of Kabīr, Tulsīdās, and Sūrdās.

मैं भारतीय क्लासिकों का शुरू से अध्येता रहा हूँ और इनका खुलकर उपयोग करता हूँ। मध्य युग के तुलसीदास, सूरदास, कबीरदास, कुंभनदास, रहीम आदि के सन्दर्भ और उद्धरण खूब देता हूँ पर इन शास्त्रियों के पास जो सूचियाँ रखी उनमें ये पतनशील, सामंती और जातिवादी हैं। सूरदास पतनशील रूमानी थे, तुलसीदास घृणित जातिवादी और सामंती। और मैं - पुरातनवादी ! बहुत लड़ाइयाँ लड़ी मैंने इन कवियों के लिए। तुलसीदास ने खुद जितनी लड़ाई लड़ी होगी उससे अधिक मैंने उनके लिए लड़ी।

From the very beginning, I have always been a great student of and have openly appropriated the Indian classics. I often refer and draw examples from Tulsīdās and Sūrdās, Kabīrdās, Kumbhandās, all exponents of the medieval period. But, in the agendas of these scholars, they all appear as decadent authors, with elitist and nationalist tendencies. Sūrdās was a decadent romantic. Tulsīdās was a hateful nationalist and feudal lord. And I am a conservative! I fought many battles for these poets. I fought for Tulsīdās more fights than Tulsīdās himself would have fought (Parsāī 2018 [1989]: 10).

The reference to Faiz Ahmad Faiz, the Urdū writer who founded the All Indian Progressive Movement²⁰ in the 1930s and whose poetry inspired the title of the memoir, suggests Parsāī's will to re-assess the political and aesthetic ideals of the Indian progressive literary movement of the 1930s and 1940s. Equally important is, finally, the figure of Muktibodh – depicted not only as a source of inspiration and a close friend of the satirist – but also, significantly, as the representative of a committed and dissident poetic view somewhat close to what was pursued by Parsāī. Therefore, it is reasonable to wonder about who the literary masters (*ācaryā*) are that, in Parsāī's view, were responsible for having marginalized satire in the canon of Hindī literature. The answer, once again, can be drawn from the reading of the memoir and it is, for one, quite surprising. Parsāī, indeed, is not critical of Hazārī Prasād Dvivedī (1907-1979), who is unanimously deemed as the main post-colonial Hindī literary critic.²¹ Indeed, according

²⁰ A Marxist-inspired association which played a major role in the literary debates in India in the 1940s and 1950s.

²¹ Dvivedī is widely considered, particularly by Namvār Siṃh (1926-2019), as the main representative of a second tradition (*dusrī paramparā*) of Hindī literary criticism (1982).

to the satirist, Dvivedī shared with him a deep interest towards early-modern North-Indian devotional literature. Moreover, both of them appreciated humorous writings and aimed to re-construct innovative and unconventional perspectives about the classics of Indian literature. Dvivedī, in fact, “was a great lover of laughter and ridicule. He was fond of the gossip meetings and made fun of the idealized characters of the classics” (हास-उपहास के बहुत शौकीन थे। गप्प-गोष्ठी के शौकीन थे। वे क्लासिकों के आदर्श पात्रों का बहुत अच्छा उपहास कर लेते थे।; Parsāi 2018 [1989]: 107). Even less does Parsāi deplore Rām Vilās Śarmā (1912-2000), a Marxist literary critic and one of Dvivedī’s main competitors in the field of literary criticism. Interestingly enough for our analysis, the authors who are blamed for being responsible of the state of marginality of satire in the Hindī literary sphere were not literary critics, but mainly contemporary avant-garde writers. Parsāi’s criticism is raised especially at the members of the *Nayī Kahānī*. More in particular, his attack is addressed towards Kamleśvar, whom he ironically defines as a lover of movements (*āndolan premi*). Further, the satirist blames Kamleśvar for having placed roadblocks on the way to the inclusion of the satirist in the closed circle of the *Nayī Kahānī* movement.

१९६५ में जैनेन्द्र कुमार से कहानीकार सम्मलेन में कई बार भेंट हुई। वह ‘नयी कहानी’ का दौर था। पता नहीं यह नाम किसने दिया। शायद नामवर सिंह ने निर्मल वर्मा की ‘परिंदे’ को हिंदी की पहली नयी कहानी कहा था। उन्होंने उषा प्रियवदा की वापसी को भी नई कहानी कहा था। पर इस ‘नयी कहानी’ आंदोलन को उठा लिया तीन तिलगों ने - कमलेश्वर, और मोहन राकेश, राजेंद्र यादव। कमलेश्वर आन्दोलनप्रेमी आदमी है। वे सबसे तीखे और मुखर थे। मेरा कोई वास्ता इस आंदोलन से नहीं था। मैं कहानी लेखक माना ही नहीं जाता था। ‘व्यंग्यकार कहकर दरकिनार कर देने में समीक्षकों, सिद्धांतकारों को भी सुविधा था और मुझे भी।

In 1965, I met Jainendra Kumār on several occasions during the assembly of novelists. Those were the times of *Nayī Kahānī*. I don't know who coined this name. It seems to me that Namvār Siṃh called ‘Parinde’ by Nirmal Varmā, as the first short story. He called also ‘Vāpasī,’ by Uṣā Priyaṃvadā. There were three pioneers who founded *Nayī Kahānī*: Kamleśvar, Mohan Rākeś, and Rājendra Yādav. Kamleśvar was a lover of movements. He was, among all of them, the most straightforward and uninhibited. I had no relationship with this literary group. I was not deemed a short story writer. Literary critics and intellectuals had a good time marginalizing me and calling me a simple satirist and for me it was the same (Parsāi 2018 [1989]: 105).

In other contexts, for example, in the interviews given during the 1980s, while acknowledging that “applying this kind of label is not at all positive” (एक तो इस प्रकार का लेबिल लगाना ठीक नहीं है।; Parsāi 1985: 410), Parsāi admits that he had some responsibility in the partial ostracization to which he is was subjected as a satirist in the framework of Hindī literature (Parsāi 1985: 410). In this memoir, however, he clearly reveals the discontent and the sense of rivalry, both ideological and aesthetic, with the *Nayī Kahānī* movement. Further the satirist claims to be devoid of any connection with this movement. However,

it must be stressed that, although the satirist made such an assessment, it is not totally true that his satirical writings were far from the aesthetic and ideological aims of the movement. Indeed, it is essential to repeat that the same Kamleśvar made a reference to the relevance of Hindī satirical literature of the 1950s and 1960s in his 1966 essay, albeit in a succinct manner.²² Parsāi replied to this partial intellectual and literary ostracization by using the weapon of satire. In his view, in fact, the *Nayī Kahānī* movement, devoid of the ideals of the progressive movement, will lead Hindī literature towards the creative setback that manifested in the mid-1960s and culminated in the substantial literary stasis of the second half of the 1970s, the years of the Emergency (Parsāi 2018 [1989]: 105). And, ironically, following Parsāi's view, it will be this movement that will produce the “non-story” (*akāhānī*), the genre which will characterize the writings of the successors of *Nayī Kahānī* (Parsāi 2018 [1989]: 105).

6. Conclusions

In light of what has been investigated so far, it seems that Parsāi's memoir, written in the end of the 1980s, occupies a peculiar position in the Hindī literary production of this period. Parsāi denies the possibility of the autobiographical genre to be used as a tool for the construction of counter narratives by marginal communities. This is particularly significant if we consider that the 1980s was a decade characterized by the rise of communalist Hindū-oriented tendencies within the Indian political landscape. Doubtless, the satirist clearly condemned such conservative tendencies. Further, Parsāi's view highlighted the harassments suffered by subjects, communities and groups at the margins of Indian society. Indeed, as clearly outlined by Kamleśvar in his literary essay *Nayī Kahānī kī bhūmikā*, Hindī satire genuinely embodied the inner social contradictions of Indian society in the decades which followed Indian independence. Nevertheless, if we consider the radical ideological changes which were enacted by the use of autobiographies by Marāṭhī writers in the 1970s and, later, since the 1990s, also by Hindī writers, this memoir could appear as a partially outdated work, both on an aesthetic as well as on a socio-cultural and ideological level. Nevertheless, it must be admitted that this life writing plays also a specific socio-culturing function, which is that of shading light on the status of partial marginalization of Indian satirists in the contemporary Hindī public sphere. In this sense, it is interesting to note how, from Parsāi's perspective, the reasons for this ghettoization involved not only public institutions but also, significantly, the literary avant-garde movements which, while

²² Moreover, it must be outlined that, in the 1970s, Kamleśvar was editor of *Sārikā*, a literary journal on which Parsāi authored the column *Kabīr kharā bazār mein*.

contributing to the canonization of the satire, were also suspicious about the artistic merits of satirists. It must be admitted that, nowadays, Parsāī, like other satirists, is a canonized voice in the history of Hindī literature. Further, it is relevant to state that his marginalization, unlike that of the Dalit and Ādivāsī authors of autobiographies, was not based on socio-cultural reasons. However, notwithstanding this ambiguous position, Parsāī attempted to raise a deep criticism at Indian mainstream culture for not tributing any value to satire; further, he intended to promote the idea of being, for a large part of his career, a marginalized author, who obtained a partial fame just after having overcome many ideological and aesthetic prejudices. From this perspective, this memoir is used by the satirist as a medium employed to promote the relevance of satire in Indian contemporary context. This relevance, nowadays, is confirmed by the censorship to which many Indian satirists, especially Hindī stand-up comedians, are still subjected. It is out of doubt that contemporary Hindī satire, especially if the performative uses of it are taken into consideration, has considerably changed since the 1990s. Indeed, even some socially marginalized authors who in the past did not write or perform satirical works nowadays use this tool in order to raise specific socio-cultural and political claims. After all satire, as recently highlighted by Knight (2004: 6), has been for a long time a male and elitarian business. However, it is important to highlight that there is a subtle *fil rouge* which still connects post-colonial literary satirists such as Parsāī to the new generations of literary and extra-literary satirists. This line consists of the same status of partial marginalization to which these authors have been and still are subject for different socio-cultural, aesthetical and ideological reasons. Interestingly, as the present article aimed to show, in addition to censorship, in many occasions literary and extra-literary satirists using Hindī as their linguistic medium had to face a partial ostracization even within Indian avant-garde cultural milieus.

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