

Roshni Rustomji-Kerns has lived, studied and worked in India, Pakistan, Lebanon, the United States of America and Mexico. She is the coeditor of *Blood Into Ink: South Asian And Middle Eastern Women Write War* and the editor of *Living In America: Poetry And Fiction By South Asian American Writers and Encounters: People Of Asian Descent In The Americas*. Her short stories have appeared in journals and anthologies in the United States of America, Canada and Pakistan. Her novel *The Braided Tongue* was published in 2003.

(Passages in boldface below shed light on the story "Thanksgiving in a Monsoonless Land.")

From "The 1947 Partition Archive," Stanford University: Oral history with Roshini Rustomji, August 19, 2012:

Dr. Roshni Rustomji-Kerns was born into a Parsi* family in Mumbai in 1938. Her father Behram's family was from Karachi and had lived there for at least three or four generations. Her mother Gulnar's family was from Mumbai. Dr. Rustomji was named Roshni, meaning light, as she was born during Diwali, the festival of light.

Dr. Rustomji describes the story she heard growing up of how the Parsis first came to India. It is said that they first arrived into India by boat after fleeing persecution in Iran. They requested the king of Gujarat to grant them asylum. The king told them that his kingdom was completely full and there was no room for more people. He demonstrated this by sending them a tumbler of milk that was filled to the brim. At this point, one of the Parsi elders on board the ship added a pinch of sugar to the milk, thus indicating that they would not bring the vessel to overflow and indeed make the land sweeter. It is believed that the king accepted the Parsis into the kingdom and they were required to adopt the local language, Gujarati, and wear the local clothing.

Dr. Rustomji says that while her father maintained this apolitical stance, her **mother was very politically engaged and active. She always maintained that the subcontinent would someday gain independence from British colonial rule.** Her mother taught her about justice and about how her great-grandfather respected all religions. The stories she heard about her own family's history led her to think about diversity from a very young age. **Her father's family has origins in China, while her mother was born in Japan.**

When she was about six years old, the family moved to Mumbai and Roshni was enrolled in a Parsi school. After a year in Mumbai, the family moved back to Karachi. Roshni was in Karachi when Pakistan got its independence on August 14, 1947. **During Partition, her mother became part of a women's group called 'Poor Families Relief'. The group helped refugee women living in the camps. They taught the women how to sew and embroider.**

Dr. Rustomji studied at the American University of Beirut, Lebanon, and completed her Bachelor of Arts in English Literature in 1961. She later earned her Master of Arts in English and American Literature at Duke University and completed a PhD in Comparative Literature, studying English, classical Sanskrit and classical Greek literature at the University of California, Berkeley in 1973.

(from Sonoma State University website):

Dr. Rustomji is Professor Emerita from the Hutchins School of Interdisciplinary Studies, Sonoma State University (California), 1993. She began her career at Sonoma State in 1973 as the Coordinator of the BA Program in India Studies. She was a member of the Hutchins School faculty from 1989- 1992. During her tenure at Sonoma State University she taught in the India Studies Program, the English Department, the Women's Studies Department and the Hutchins School of Interdisciplinary Studies. She was the coordinator of the India Studies Program from 1973 to 1989 and the coordinator of the Interdisciplinary Studies Program from 1978 to 1980. She was a Consulting Professor and Visiting Scholar at the Center for Latin American Studies, Bolivar House, at Stanford University 1997-2005. She was an adjunct faculty member at the New College of California in San Francisco 1997-2008. She continues to work in the area of contemporary literature and ethnic and colonial studies.

Dr. Rustomji is the coeditor of a special edition of ARTES DE MEXICO on the subject of **the China Poblana and her essay on Mirrha- Catarina de San Juan** is included in the journal (2003). *(See page 4 of these notes.)*

Parsis *(from Wikipedia)* or **Parsees** (lit. 'Persian' in the Persian language), are an ethnoreligious group who migrated to the Indian subcontinent from Persia during the Muslim conquest of Persia of 633–654 CE; one of two such groups to have done so, with the other being Iranis. Zoroastrianism is the ethnic religion of the Parsi people. Parsis migrated from the Sasanian Empire to Gujarat, where they were given refuge between the 8th and 10th centuries CE to escape persecution following the Muslim conquests.

The word *Parsi* is derived from the Persian language, and literally translates to *Persian Farsi*, which is used as the local defining name for the Persian language, is the Arabized form of the word *Parsi*; the language sees widespread use in Iran, Afghanistan, Tajikistan and other regions of the former Persian empires.

The Parsis were among several Indian communities that constituted the middle class and were traditionally urban and professional (doctors, lawyers, teachers, engineers, etc.) immediately after Indian independence in 1947. According to P. K. Verma, "Education was a common thread that bound together this pan-Indian elite"; almost all of the members of these communities could read and write in English and were educated beyond regular schooling institutions. As such, Parsis are still considered to be a model minority in India.

Notes for "Thanksgiving in a Monsoonless Land," by Roshni Rustomji

References to Indian cooking (*You didn't know you were going to get a cooking class!*)
pp. 328-329 in story:

Daal: lentils

Palao (polao) is a rice dish, cooked in seasoned broth with rice, meat and spices. A polao is often complemented with raita. The rice is made in mutton or beef or chicken stock and an array of spices including: coriander seeds, cumin, cardamom, cloves and others.

Papadum is a thin, crisp, round flatbread from India. It is typically based on a seasoned dough usually made from peeled black gram flour, either fried or cooked with dry heat. Flours made from other sources such as lentils, chickpeas, rice, tapioca, certain millets or potato can be used.

Achaar is a catch-all term for pickle, a popular condiment in Indian cuisine. Pickles in the north of the country are typically made with mustard oil, while the South Indian style is made with sesame oil. Achaar adds a tangy, sweet, and salty heat, whether on its own as a side dish or paired with rice or stews.

Pukka is a word of Hindi and Urdu origin literally meaning "cooked, ripe" and figuratively "fully formed", "solid", "permanent", "for real" or "sure". In UK slang, it can mean "genuine" or simply "very good".

Curandera - Spanish for a healer (p.334)

gaaro: (p. 332, 338 ff. in story)

For pictures of a beautiful gaaro sari, go to
www.michaelbackmanltd.com/archived_objects/embroidered-Akho-Garo-Sari-Parsi

Embroidered Akho Gara Sari, Parsee, India, early 20th century

"This bright and fine *akho gara* sari (*akho* means 'full' as in 'fully embroidered') was made in Surat for the Parsee (Parsi) community. It comprises a scarlet-red silk gauze **beautifully embroidered with Chinese-style embroidery in cream satin-silk thread.** The borders are densely embroidered with multiple birds amid flowers and foliage. The central panel is decorated with birds and scrolling peonies and foliage.

The Parsees arrived as religious refugees to Gujarat in India in the eighth century from what is now Iran. They agreed on arrival to adopt many of local ways and so the women took to wearing saris in the manner of the local Gujarati women. Over time, Parsee saris – *gara* – developed their own style. Typically, a Parsee gara is five to five-and-a-half metres long and 110-120cm wide.

Originally, they were imported from China, but later, the saris were made locally in Gujarat but retaining some Chinese influence in the embroidery. They were costly when made and so were **treated as heirloom pieces, passed from mother to daughter.**

The Parsees, who follow the ancient religion of Zoroastrianism, first came to India from Persia in the 8th or tenth century, fleeing religious persecution. Today, probably there are about 125,000 Parsees or Zoroastrians worldwide. **About 70,000 live in Mumbai/Bombay, a city of 14 million people.** Another 1,700 live in Karachi in Pakistan. **The Parsees of India and Pakistan are a distinct but exceptionally successful commercial minority.** By the nineteenth century, Bombay's Parsee families dominated the city's commercial sector, particularly in spinning and dyeing and banking. Despite their wealth, India's Parsee community is hugely respected and admired in India because of the community's humility and charitable works which extend way beyond serving members of their own community. Well-off though they are as a community, the Parsees are dying out. It has been estimated that a thousand Parsees die each year in Mumbai, but only 300-400 are born. Today, one in five Mumbai Parsees is aged 65 or more."

References: Shah, S., & T. Vatsal, *Peonies & Pagodas: Embroidered Parsi Textiles – The Tapi Collection*, Garden Silk Mills, 2010, and Stewart, S. (ed.), *The Everlasting Flame: Zoroastrianism in History and Imagination*, SOAS, 2013.

China Poblana (pp. 336-337 in story)

China Poblana, a style of dress worn by Mexican women in Puebla from the sixteenth through the late nineteenth century. The word *china* has little to do with China. *China poblana* was originally the name given to domestic servants but also was used to refer to a pulque seller, a woman who wrapped cigars, a laundress, or a prostitute. A *china poblana* was distinguished by her ornate style of dress, which was distinct from indigenous and European upper-class modes. Her skirt of colorful, sturdy wool was dotted with sequins of gold and silver. Cinched at the waist and very wide at the bottom, it covered billowing petticoats and was complemented by ribbons, silk stockings, and satin slippers. Her finely embroidered blouse was immaculately white. She wrapped a rebozo around her arms and coiffed her abundant hair in thick braids, interwoven with colored ribbons and gathered on the top of her head by a fine comb. She completed her costume with long gold earrings and fine bracelets. She did not merely walk. She sauntered with elegance and arrogance along the streets.

The popular image and inspiration for the *China poblana* dress style derives from the life and legend of Catarina de San Juan (c. 1607–1688). Although she was born into an aristocratic family in India, Catarina was baptized and sold into the slave trade before arriving in New Spain. Considered a visionary, Catarina not only achieved sainthood, but also became an important symbol of mestizo womanhood and the city of Puebla, where a monument of *La China Poblana* stands.

During the Wars of the Reform, the *china poblana* became a national symbol, accompanying her husband into battles and adorning her costume with tricolor ribbons. Although her dress fell into disuse in Puebla in the 1880s, it has preoccupied writers and poets as material for legend and folkloric color since the colonial period. Stylizations of the dress are still used in festivals, especially in central Mexico. The tricolor skirt with an eagle embroidered in sequins is one of the best-known versions.

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