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Diasporic Dilemma in Rohinton Mistry's *Tales from Firozsha Baag*

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Abstract

Rohinton Mistry is an Indian born Canadian writer. He is a Parsi Zoroastrian. His writing reflects his own experience of double displacement. He beautifully explores the themes of the complexities of the immigrant experience, the clash of life styles and cultural disorientation in his work. *Tales from Firozsha Baag* (1987) is a collection of eleven interrelated stories that deal with the Parsis living in a Bombay complex apartment. The aim of this research paper is to explore the diasporic dilemma of the Parsi characters portrayed by Rohinton Mistry in *Tales from Firozsha Baag* and to show how they are torn between 'here' and 'there' and face the sense of alienation and separation.

Keywords

Diasporic Dilemma; Displacement; Rohinton Mistry; *Tales from Firozsha Baag*.

The world is rapidly changing due to globalization and technological advancement. People are migrating from their homeland to other countries with

the hope for a better life and a better future. Being at home is like being stagnant while moving abroad brings lots of opportunities, progress and wealth. Immersed in fantasy, they think that moving abroad is the only better option for a better life so they move from one country to another. They aspire to build a new life in a strange place but as Rohinton Mistry writes in *Tales from Firozsha Baag*: “The world can be a bewildering place, and dreams and ambitions are often paths to the most pernicious of traps” (203). Sometimes fantasy clashes with reality. Unable to adapt themselves to a new world, they experience a sense of loss, alienation and nostalgia. This results in a diasporic dilemma whether to stay where they are or to go back to their homeland and this bitter reality is very well depicted by the diasporic writer Rohinton Mistry in *Tales from Firozsha Baag*.

The term ‘Diaspora’ is derived from the Greek word which literally means “scattering” or “dispersion”. It was originally used to refer to the dispersion of the Jews to the lands outside Palestine after the Babylonian captivity. Since the late twentieth century, the notion of Diaspora has been used to describe any ethnic population who resides in the countries other than their own historical homelands. If we refer to the diasporic experiences of Jews, Armenians or Africans, the term conveys a negative connotation due to its association with forced displacement, victimization or alienation. But in its broader sense, it describes those displaced people who maintain connection with the country of their origin. The Parsis immigrated to India to avoid the religious persecution by the Muslims. It is believed that they first settled at Hormuz on the Persian Gulf but finding themselves still persecuted they set sail for India arriving in the 8th century. The migration might have taken place as late as the 10th century or in both. They settled first at Diu in Kathiawar but soon moved to Gujarat where they remained for about 800 years as a small agricultural community.

Rohinton Mistry who writes about the expatriate experiences of the Parsi community is an Indian-born Canadian writer. Like many of the characters in his stories, Mistry is of Parsi origin. He was born in 1952 in Mumbai, India. He

earned a BA in Mathematics and Economics at the University of Mumbai. He immigrated to Canada with his wife in 1975 and settled in Toronto and received a BA in English and Philosophy. His three novels *Such a Long Journey* (1991), *A Fine Balance* (1996) and *Family Matters* (2002) were shortlisted for Booker Prize. His fiction fetched him the prestigious awards like the Commonwealth Writers Prize for Best Book, the Los Angeles Times Award, the Giller Prize, The Governor-General's Award and the Royal Society of Literature's Winifred Holtby Award. Mistry belongs to the category of writers whose roots were in India but they shifted somewhere else and throughout their life they continued missing their homeland. When he was in Canada, he missed his homeland but even in India he had not been a complete insider. Sharmani Patricia Gabriel in her article "Interrogating Multiculturalism: Double Dispora, Nation and Re-Narration in Rohinton Mistry's Canadian Tales" makes an observation:

While most minority migrant writers speak of their experiences of alienation in Canada, Mistry as a Canadian of Parsi ethnicity, has experienced national exclusion not only in Canada but also in his homeland. (28)

His writing is informed by this experience of double displacement.

Tales from Firozsha Baag is a collection of eleven intersecting stories in which Rohinton Mistry reveals the rich, complex patterns of life inside a Bombay apartment building Firozsha Baag. He presents the events and details of the characters' struggle to find their identities in the postcolonial 'new' India, as well as immigrants' attempts to adapt to their new worlds in places like Canada. All the characters express knowingly and unknowingly the tensions between the past and the present, between the old and the new. The stories *Auspicious Occasion*, *One Sunday*, *The Ghost of Firozsha Baag*, *Condolence Visit*, *The Collectors*, *Of White Hairs and Cricket*, *The Paying Guest* and *Exercisers* focus on the experiences of a Parsi community while *Squatter*, *Lend Me Your Light* and

Swimming Lessons deal with the impact of expatriation on the lives of young Parsi protagonists abroad.

Squatter is a very interesting story in which Mistry presents the issues related to migration in a very humorous manner. First the narrator Nariman Hansotia tells the kids of Baag the story of the brave Savushka who had an amazing talent as a cricket player and as a hunter but could not find happiness in his life in spite of his success. Then the story shifts to the experiences of Sarosh who migrates to Canada but fails to find happiness there. He thinks that after migrating to Canada his life will completely change. He declares that he will come back to India if he fails to become a true Canadian in every sense within ten years' time. But after migrating to Canada, he keeps searching for "his old place in the pattern of life he had vacated ten years ago" (202). He feels that he is not a true Canadian because he does not know how to use the European toilet. He can empty his bowels only in a squatting position. Sarosh develops some sort of neurosis as the ten years' limit approaches. He even takes the help of the Immigrant Aid Society, but none of their outrageous suggestions or so called technological gadgets helps him. He tries all possible methods to adapt himself to this country but he fails and decides to come back to India. Finally when he is on his flight to India, he manages to perform in the toilet as the plane takes off. He wonders whether his success came before or after the ten years' time limit had expired. In this story Rohinton Mistry captures the dilemma of the expatriate whether to stay on in Canada or to return back to his country. Sarosh expresses his pain just like the Shakespeare tragic hero Othello and says:

Tell them that in Toronto once lived a Parsi boy as best as he could.
Set down this and say, besides, that for some it was good and for
some it was bad, but for me life in the land of milk and honey was
just a pain in the posterior. (203)

Lend Me Your Light is the story of three characters – Percy, his brother Kersi and Jamshed, Percy's friend. Readers get three different views about the

life lived in India and abroad. Percy wants to stay in India and dedicate his life to social work in Indian villages. Jamshed feels that he has “absolutely no future in this place. Bloody corruption everywhere” (215). Therefore, he migrates to U.S. and makes a good fortune. He is completely an anti-Indian. Kersi is unsure about his relationship with India but he cannot afford to hate India the way Jamshed does. He decides to migrate to Canada instead of toiling in Indian villages like Percy. But he still feels confused and is awoken by the pain in his eyes the night before he leaves for Canada. He is guilty of his “sin of hubris for seeking emigration out of the land of his birth” (217). His dilemma is reflected when he compares himself with Tiresias: “I, Tiresias, blind and throbbing between two lives, the one in Bombay and the one to come in Toronto...” (217).

At last when he visits India, he feels quite upset. He feels that living the Indian life was in fact a process of entering the combat zone. When he goes back to Toronto, he thinks that he has brought back with him “entire burden of riddles and puzzles unsolved”. He describes himself as: “Tiresias, throbbing between two lives, humbled by the ambiguities and dichotomies...” (233).

The last reflexive story *Swimming Lessons* is set in Canada. Here the trauma of finding an identity in the West is linked to sexuality. The women whom he observes with his lusty eyes from the kitchen window do not seem attractive anymore when he invites them in the elevator. When he looks at their wrinkled skin, aging hands, aging bottoms, varicose veins, he feels that “the lustrous trick of the Sun and lotion has ended” (280). The attractive bodies of women can be compared to the life in the West which glitters only from the far. There are also other symbolic references in the story. Kersi fails to learn swimming in Canada and in India. That symbolizes his failure to assimilate in India and Canada.

Mistry also shows a Parsi community torn between the old ways and the new. Several characters in the collection reject Parsi tradition and adopt secular modern customs. In *The Exercisers*, the young protagonist Jahangir defies his parents and their spiritual advisor Bhagwan Baba by dating a girl who is not a

Parsi. His mother who is very conservative is worried about the future of Jahangir. She warns him that if he continues his relationship with that girl all his plans to go to America will come to nothing. Thus Jahangir is torn between his ambition and love, between his mother and his girlfriend. Daulat of *Condolence Visit* is in tug of war between two worlds - one is a world of old traditions and customs and the other world is a world of her freedom. She shocks her neighbours Najamai and Moti by departing from the religious custom and refusing to mourn her husband according to Parsi tradition. She finally decides to sell her husband's *pugree* to a young man as she feels that her husband would be very happy to see someone getting married in his *pugree* if he were alive. In the story *The Paying Guests*, Khorshedbai is a mentally disturbed woman who imprisons Kashmira's new born child in a cage. Kashmira and Boman hate that mad woman. How to drive these paying guests out of their home is a quandary of Boman. He remembers Mr. Kulkarni's words: "It is easier to get rid of poisonous kaankhajuro which has crawled through ear and nibbled its way to your brain than to evict a paying guest who had been allowed into your flat" (154).

Some characters are torn between likes and dislikes but certain incidents in their life convert their dislikes into likes. The boy in *Of White Hairs and Cricket* who plucks white hairs of his father finds the task boring and he is reluctant to do it. He feels that none of his friends would be doing this kind of boring task on Sundays. They must be playing out in the ground and he has to pluck white hairs of his father. But his attitude changes at the end. Similarly in the story *The Collectors* Mrs. Modi hates Jahangir's Sunday visits at their home and feels that Mr. Modi is neglecting his child and paying more attention to Jahangir. But after the death of Mr. Modi she changes completely. She gives Mr. Modi's entire collection of stamps to Jahangir and asks him for forgiveness.

Mistry shows mental anguish of his Parsi characters. He probes deeper into the psyche of his characters. The lonely Parsi maid of *The Ghost of Firozsha*

Baag has a sexual relationship with a spirit. It is a sign of her sexual repression that results from her isolation. She feels that she has lost her identity after she started working as an ayah in Bombay. The Parsis living in Firozsha Baag started calling her 'Jaakaylee' instead of 'Jacquiline'. Najamai in *One Sunday* is a lonely lady whose daughter Soli had died and two daughters Dolly and Vera went abroad for higher studies. One Sunday she decides to spend time with her sister's family in Bandra. But she is disturbed by the alleged theft of eighty rupees. The prime suspect is the local odd job man Francis. Then she decides to hire someone who can cook, clean and look after her and provide company to her as sometimes "it felt so lonely being alone in the flat" (45). Rustomji in *Auspicious Occasion* feels "this was no country for sorrow or compassion or pity-these were worthless and at best inappropriate" (10). When he hears about the death of Dastoorji, he is shocked completely and can't digest "Parsi killing Parsi...chasniwala and dastoor..." (23).

Thus Rohinton Mistry has brilliantly captured the lives of Parsi community living in India and abroad in *Tales from Firozsha Baag*. The in-between life of Parsi community is described in a light hearted manner. He succeeds in depicting the cultural dilemmas, the complexities of the immigrant experience, the clash of life styles and the conflicts of assimilation.

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