

A STUDY OF ETHNICITY IN ROHINTON MISTRY'S 'TALES FROM FIROZSHA BAAG

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ABSTRACT: Ethnicity and Cultural identity have become the major issues of discussion and criticism in the postcolonial era. Rohinton Mistry is one of the eminent international postcolonial writers of Parsi origin who is now settled in Canada and writes from there. His primary aim is to analyse the problems of the microscopic Parsi community. Parsi writing in English especially after India's independence has become purely ethnocentric. Mistry is not an exception. His writings are characterized both by ethnocentric and minority traits. He delineates all the concerns of the present day Parsis. The Parsis experience a sense of anxiety by being the minuscule diasporic community in India where Hindus dominate. The anxiety roots from the insecurity and as a result a sense of identity crisis looms large in the hearts of the Parsi people. All the eleven stories of the Tales from Firozsha Baag (1987) address the exigencies of the Zoroastrian community with their several problems and perspectives. The present paper seeks to analyse how the tales of Mistry foregrounds this ethnic anxiety influence which is inherent in the hearts of the Parsi folk.

Key Words: *Parsi, Zoroastrian, Ethnicity, Anxiety, Multicultural, Immigrant, Minority, Ambivalence, Diaspora.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Rohinton Mistry, a famous diasporic Parsi writer who now lives in Canada, continues to make India, Bombay and the Parsi community the focus of his writing. In order to understand the nuances of Mistry's writing we need to see him from various lenses: the diasporic, the Parsi and the post-colonial. Like all other Parsi writers; Saros Dara Cowasjee, Boman Desai, Firdaus Kanga, Farrukh Dhondy, Dina Metha, Gieve Patel, Keki Nusserwanjee Daruwalla, and others, Mistry is also concerned with the preservation of the ethnic identity of his community. According to Nilufer E. Bharucha, The Parsis are the single largest group of Ethno-religious or minority discourse practitioners amongst Indian

English writers (qtd. in Dharan 100). Mistry presents his community through the different narratives of his characters who invariably express their concerns for the community and the changes that affect it. By focusing on their community in their narratives, they preserve and protect themselves and thus throw light on the existing reality. Most of his novels and short stories focus on the Parsi community and Tales from Firozsha Baag is in the sort. He becomes the voice of his community and makes his readers aware about the culture, religion, practices, beliefs, food and idiosyncrasy commonly found among the members of his group. Rohinton Mistry's Tales from Firozsha Baag is a collection of short stories engaged in ethnicity. Parsi customs,

costumes and cuisine, we-consciousness among the Parsis, alienation from the majority, dominant community and downgrading of status in post colonial India all find a place in this collection. The stories, “Auspicious Occasion”, “One Sunday”, “The Ghost of Firozsha Baag”, “Condolence Visit”, “The Collectors”, “Of White Hairs and Cricket”, “The Paying Guests”, “Exercises” focuses on Parsi community as predominant theme. All the trappings of a Zoroastrian ethnic identity are brought to our attention: Parsi festival of Behramroje, the visit to the agyari and the couple’s spotless white attire in the form of a dugli and a sari, meant especially for the blessed occasion of the Behramroje. The tradition-bound Parsi community sees itself under obligation to celebrate Zoroastrian festivals that make them stand apart from other communities. The visit to the fire temple is almost mandatory as their distinctive act of cultural preservation.

The first story, „Auspicious Occasion“, concentrates on the quotidian life style of a Parsi couple. Mistry presents this couple to observe and practice all important days of the community to reinstate the distinctiveness of their ethnic marginalization. On the day of Zoroastrian festival of Behram roj, the couple’s mandatory visit to agyari with spotless white attire of dugli and sari are shown. Mistry’s emphasis is on Parsi traditionality and preservation of the cultural identity to make his community a distinctive one from the others. The story brings the plight of the protagonist Rustomji through the comic elements which highlight the challenge faced by the Parsis in the modern world. Mistry shows Parsis are trying to maintain equilibrium

between the tradition and modernity to keep up with the pace. Rustomji and Mehroo are contrasted with each other. Mehroo is an orthodox Parsi who performs all ceremonies appropriately maintaining the calendar and Rustomji knows these „customs [are] dead and meaningless“ (TFB 8) so he secretly „enjoys most of the age old traditions while pretending indifference“ (TFB 4). Mistry’s intention is to show that despite contempt for the non-Parsis, the Zoroastrian community is not fully cohesive. The auspicious occasion turns to be inauspicious at the gloomy incident of murder of dustoorji by a fellow Parsi chasniwalla. The correlation of the paan stained red and white dugli of Rustomji is juxtaposed with the blood stained dugli of the murdered dustoor. This speaks of the communal degeneration within a minority community.

In the next story „One Sunday“, Najamai is an old woman who lives alone as he children have emigrated. She is a proud owner of a refrigerator and permits two other families to use the fridge. An old spinster Tehmina uses the fridge to store ice for evening scotch as she avoids the late evening trips to Tar Gully to buy ice for her drink. Similarly Sillo Boyce avoids the trouble of buying meat everyday and takes the help of Najamai’s generosity to use the fridge. Najamai considers his neighbours as a nuisance who derive undue advantage of it. Najamai has also taken the opportunity of mutual help and co-existence to go out unconcerned. Francis who is a Christian repair man neighbour, is mistaken for a thief by Tehmina and gets beaten up. Through this story Mistry exposes the insecurities of the old people and the interdependence among the residents of the Baag.

‘The Ghost of Firozsha Baag’, is another story where Mistry presents the cultural „other“ which „defines Parsis“ parochial attitude towards the non-Parsis“ (Wadhawan 53). This is the story of Jaykalee, the Christian ayah from Goa who migrated to the urban land to escape unemployment in the hometown. Mistry writes this story in first person to unearth the suffering of the woman at the hands of the tyrannical employers. On the eve of Christmas she sees a ghost in the compound and the ghost becomes more mischievous as it reminds her of the illicit affairs at younger age. Jaykalee has faith in salvation and her confession to the priest stops the ghost to visit her. This story in the first person narrative celebrates the „sexual fantasies of an overworked and lonely woman (Bhautoo-Dewnarain 10). Jaykalee“s employer has also become a victim of the same hallucination of the ghost outside the flat and this delusion follows a frantic exorcism of rituals and prayers at the fire temple. But in actuality the apparition is only Jaykalee wrapped in her bed cover enjoying the freshness and quiet of the night. Mistry has brought the employer-woman relationship in the forefront along with the preservation of meditations and religious rituals and reverence for the tradition. This story has a bearing with the cross cultural influences that permeates the Parsi community.

In the next story „Condolence Visit‘ Mistry delineates the conflict between the urge of preserving Parsi minority traditions and rituals amid the advent of modernization that contributes a change in Parsi ethnic nature. This is a story of Daulat Mirza, a Parsi widow, struggling to cope with memories after the loss of her

husband. Daulat Mirza defiantly resists the insistence of her near and dear ones to follow traditional Parsi mourning rituals. She thinks traditional Parsi mourning rituals as futile and artificial. So she innovates her own way of observing condolence. She secretly leaves the lamp lit in her deceased husband“s room after the prescribed four days to find comforting solitude. She takes the unorthodox way to sort out her dead husband“s clothes to give away to an orphanage and the beautifully crafted pugree to a young lad for his wedding. This story of Daulat Mirza underlines how she copes with the personal loss and also redefines the tradition by discarding the lifeless burden of the oppressive Parsi mourning customs. ‘The Collectors’ is a story about the fragility of human relationship. Here Mistry highlights on the childhood experiences of young Jehangir Bulsara. He is portrayed as a lean, studious and isolated boy who does not partake in the lively activities of the other boys in the Baag. Dr. Mody identifies this boy as a different one from the group and has grown affection for him. Dr. Mody“s familial and parental relationship proves to be a failure. So he finds solace and comfort in sharing his passion for philately with Jehangir. This devotion and affection of philately has become an addiction to Jehangir and he turns into the path of condemnable offence and dubious act of theft. This story reflects the contrast of Pesi Padmaroo and Jehangir. Mistry explores the „hopeful childhood bond that looks forward to the future and the nostalgia for the past“ (Bhautoo-Dewnarain 11). The breaking of relationship is a matter of concern amid

the waning out of the dwindling Parsi community.

‘Of White Hairs and Cricket’ is a hymn of thanksgiving to Mistry’s own childhood in Bombay. Nariman Hansotia as a skilful teller of anecdotes becomes the author’s voice. Nariman becomes Mistry himself, carrying a meta-fictional account of author’s life, „function[ing] as the tribal spokesman“ with his „repository of the community“’s heritage“ (Malak 190). He takes us back to the departed days of the Firozsha tenement. The traces of Parsi life are strewn everywhere- a Parsi calendar with its English and Parsi names and roje in Gujarati beside each date. The Murphy radio, the gramophone playing English records delineates an admixture of a common anglicized Indian-Parsi household where Parsi parents desire that their wards „must go, too, to America“ (TFB 136). The vignettes of the metropolitan city have become lively in the hands of Mistry. He shows the image of boy’s grandmother spinning kusti as well as the people who come to Irani restaurant for their morning chai and bun. Again the image of cricket on Sunday mornings at the Marine Drive maidaan as well as the rattling BEST buses of the city. The purpose of Nariman’s story telling is to preserve the Parsi culture’s „community ethos“ (Malak 110). Nariman tells about the Parsi anxieties of identity and displacement. He defines the nature of Parsi identity. Mistry here emphasises Parsi community’s fragmented nature despite its cohesion and the attempt to preserve its distinctiveness.

‘The Paying Guests’ is a story of paucity affliction, delusion and insanity. This story highlights a young couple, Boman and Kashmira. Khorshedbhai and Ardesar are

the two paying guests who come to live with Boman and Kashmira when they decide to supplement their income by subletting a part of their small flat. The old lady Khorshedbhai becomes a burden when she was asked to vacate the room for the convenience of the newborn baby of Kashmira. But Khorshedbhai instead of providing help proves to be a nuisance. Kashmira and her new-born baby are stranded in their own room encircled by din and litter being hoarded in front of the door. Boman is helpless and nobody turns to be helpful to get them out of this ordeal. Afterwards, Khorshedbhai’s lunacy heightens when she locks the baby in the parrot coop and proceeds to nourish with parrot food. This time the inmates of Firozsha Baag become outraged and ready to evacuate the paying guests to repossess the lost space. Boman and Kashmira becomes victim of circumstances. Various aspects like poverty, solitude, desertion, madness and harassment have become prominent in the hand of Rohinton Mistry. ‘Squatter’ is a tale based on the problem of immigrant in Canada’s multicultural mosaic. The story teller juxtaposes „the rational realist with the surrealist postmodern“ (Bhautoo-Dewnarain 14). Here Nariman Hansotia, a resident of the apartment, becomes the author’s voice in storytelling. He assembles children for his story telling sessions and narrates to them the Parsi anxieties and struggles of identity and displacement as an immigrant. Nariman Hansotia is presented as „perfect English“ which refers to the natural penchant for Anglicization. Nariman becomes Mistry himself, deliberating a meta-fictional account of the author’s life, „functioning as the tribal spokesman“ with his „repository of the community’s

heritage“ (Malak 190). Here Nariman is the preserver of the Parsi culture and ethos. As a Parsi spokesperson, he defines the nature of Parsi hybridity that believes only in selective assimilation“ (Wadhawan 55). This tale narrates the comically absurd and tragic story of Sarosh“s experience in Canada. Sarosh“s problem is a promise to return if he is unable to adapt to Canada. The thematic focus of the writer is on the surreal dilemma that allows the author to deal with divergent cultural habits. Nandini Bhautoo-Dewnarain rightly observes that this narrative „implicitly presents an ironic perspective on the hypocrisy of the idealized immigrant society with its newly acquired tastes and misplaced snobbery towards its country of origin“ (15).

Another story of the collection is „Lend Me Your Light‘ reflects the nightmarish dream of immigration. This is a tale of „existential anguish“ (Bhautoo-Dewnarain 15). It focuses on the dilemma of belonging and alienation of an immigrant. Mistry shows the problems of Parsi diaspora by juxtaposing lives of two friends- Jamshed, who personified „American Dream“ and Kersi, who migrates to Canada and tries in a futile way to retain his ethnic identity in Canada. Kersi as a Indian Parsi discovers himself a transnational Tiresias, „blind and throbbing between two lives, the one in Bombay and the other in Toronto...guilty of the sin of hubris for seeking emigration out of the land of my birth“ (TFB 217). Kersi is bound between the old cultural moorings and his new adopted home, Jamshed comes to dislike his native land, „absolutely no future in this stupid place, there just any prospects (TFB 215). Even he disdains Bombay as „horrible, dirtier

than ever“ (TFB 219). Kersi like Jamshed represents the typical immigrant psyche- assimilation and nostalgia. Kersi is successful in the foreign land hut his heart aches for his homeland. Kersi“s psychological state gets a blow when he returns and has become disgusted by the „hostility and tension“ of Bombay. But again he gets a mental shock when he sees Percy is involved in social work for the amelioration of the poor in a remote village endangering his own life.

‘Exercisers’ is the delineation of Jehangir Bulsara who is the observer of the drama that is being enacted in the Baag. Jehangir has a homosexual experience as a school boy and subsequently his adult relationship has become complicated. At his tender age Jehangir was under his mother“s guidance and care but at the advent of the adolescence he gets an acquaintance with a young girl which makes his mother full of jealousy and fear. So entangled between the „remonstrative mother and an increasingly demanding girlfriend, Jehangir seeks peace and comfort in the Hanging Gardens and the temporary excitement of watching the rippling muscles of the exercisers there“ (Bhautoo-Dewnarain 16). This tale brings out the constraints of the traditional Parsi family in relation to the adolescent girl-boy relationship. At the end of the story Jehangir rushes home in the rain to go back to his mother but his mother refuses to let him in as he was late by one minute. The last story of Tales from Firozsha Baag is „Swimming Lessons“ which in its dialogic mode enumerates various personalities in the Baag with their different attitudes to community, religion and tradition. This story is much more refined and sober than the previous stories.

Here Mistry focuses on the paralysed old man, two old ladies, Berthe- all are from the margins. The experience of the narrator in Canada is of the world full of solitariness, breaking relationship and incongruent livelihood. The author reminiscences the memories of Bombay apartment, the sea and his parents which is contrasted with his present existence at the periphery, in an apartment in Toronto. The story has some parallels- two buildings, two old men, the sanitized cleanliness of the swimming pool with the chaotic dirt of Chaupatty beach. „Swimming Lessons can be read as Mistry’s attempt to wend his way through the alienating experience of migration and the consequent onslaught of memories” (Bhautoo-Dewnarain 17). Swimming Lessons has a distinct imagery of water which symbolizes flowing of life, fluid national identity, but the inability to swim either in the waters of Chaupatty beach in Bombay or in the swimming pool in Canada becomes a metaphor of the inability of a Parsi to assimilate in either society. At the same time Mistry seeks to shed light on the diasporic experience in the multicultural context of Canada as well as in India. However Parsis have felt guilt-consciousness in diaspora and it is reflected in this story.

CONCLUSION

To conclude it can be said that the stories in Tales from Firozsha Baag, are snapshots the Parsi way of life. Therefore all the eleven stories of Tales from Firozsha Baag depict Mistry’s salient aim to be strictly a Zoroastrian chronicler. Mistry always tries to address the onslaught of modernity and the question of survival, dynamicity and heterogeneity within the Zoroastrian ethnic. The Parsis have become a

dwindling race. Despite their philanthropic attitude and highly illustrious past they are trying to survive against several odds. The ambivalence within the Parsi community comes from Parsis’ resistance to the modern ideals of secularism and the notion of religious sanctity in both the private and public sphere. Rohinton Mistry is evocative of this ethnic tension and finds a suitable way out by holding the essence of the miniscule Parsi community in his stories for the future.

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