

Attempting to Construct 'Voice' Diaspora Experiences in *Tales from Firozsha Baag*

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Focus of This Paper

This paper examines the problem of isolation and involvement while looking at man's hopelessness, him being unable to find a meaning in life due to his rootless existence. Human feelings, ideas, passions, experiences, joys, sorrows, aspirations and struggles in life form the basis of all arts and particularly, of literary art. All the literatures of the world are the outpourings of the innermost feelings of creative writers. The various commonwealth countries had easily adapted to novel writing with its comparative flexibility and variability. It has become a vehicle for the expression of their native ethos. Every novel might be said to rest upon a certain view of the world and to present a general philosophy of life. The novel is the most influential and the most widely practiced of the prose genres. It first emerged in 18th century England as a product of the middle class. The 'novel' as a literary form is one of the most notable gifts of Britishers to India.

The Problem of Individual Identity

The problem of individual identity has a complexity in its different manifestations. Psychologists and philosophers have all discussed the predicament of modern life and man, finding in both traits of deep-rooted anxiety, alienation and absurdity. People's international connections have rendered them rootless. One of the facets of a rootless existence is self-isolation which in its turn is related to the loss of identity and its quest to get out of the crisis.

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M. Sathya, M.A., M.Phil. and Dr. R. Latha Devi

344

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Isolation from the self is the basic form of human predicament. This is not only a sociological, but also a psychological problem of contemporary man and modern life.

Rohinton Mistry and Diaspora Experience

Rohinton Mistry, an Indian of Parsi origin residing in Canada is a writer of the Indian diaspora. Diasporic existence results in loneliness and a sense of exile often leading to severe identity crisis. He records this bitter experience in his fiction. Nilufer Bharucha has explored the multiple aspects of Mistry's works: his search for identity, his need for roots, the desire for location in history. Parsis in India feel insecure, experience identity crisis and feel threatened by possible submersion into the Hindu culture. The Parsi people, a minority group, has found the economy and the living conditions in India not favourable to them. So they migrate to other countries thinking that their new country would be more favourable to them. This sudden emigration to an alien land leads to identity crisis. Neither have they had their former identity, nor do they have a new one. Mistry himself had left for Canada seeking good fortune.

Savita Goel comments on this:

As a Parsi and then as an immigrant in Canada, he (Mistry) sees himself as a symbol of double displacement and this sense of double displacement is a recurrent theme in his literary works. His historical situation involves construction of a new identity in the nation to which he has emigrated and a complex relationship with the political and cultural history of the nation he has left behind. (119)

Tales from Firozsha Baag

Rohinton's *Tales from Firozsha Baag* is a book of eleven inter-related short stories. It deals with the Parsi residents in an apartment complex 'Firozsha Baag' in Mumbai. Mistry narrates the day – to –day joys and sorrows, trials and tribulations of the Parsis. The three short stories of Rohinton Mistry, namely, 'Squatters', 'Lend Me Your Light' and 'Swimming Lessons' sharply focus on the identity crisis of the Parsi.

Emotional and Cultural Conflicts

The stories show the emotional and cultural conflicts in the minds of the characters. His focus is on the internal conflict of the characters which may be the result of cultural, spiritual and psychological crisis undergone by the characters. His fiction includes race, gender and class and the main themes are the social issues such as poverty, violence and family disintegration. He also emphasizes human isolation, alienation and personal trauma that arises out of male-female relationship and individual conflicts with social institutions. His main concerns here are the declining Parsi population, late marriages, inter-caste marriages, urbanization, alienation, modernist as well as traditionalistic attitude towards their religion.

Identity Crisis and Multiculturalism

Rohinton's main focus is on the identity crisis faced by the Parsi characters as they feel threatened in the land to which they have emigrated. The inhabitants of Firozsha Baag are mostly Parsis and they constitute a tiny minority in a multi-cultural country like India. Mistry portrays the Parsis' search for their identity in the lands to which they had emigrated. This situation is well revealed in the short story 'Squatter'. This story illustrates that names represent different cultures in the same way as toilet habits do. The central character Sarosh is an emigrant in Canada. He changes his name to Sid. Sarosh's attempts to give up his own identity result in alienation and displacement. Renaming himself and his failure to defecate like a westerner, prevent him from obtaining a successful identity as a Canadian. His story is a story of a man who has lost his identity in a new land. He does not want to become adapted to the new identity. But he wants to become assimilated to it. So he changes his name to Sid. Assimilation becomes irrelevant in multi-cultural Canada. Multi-culturalism does not demand Sarosh to erase his old identity. To become a Canadian, assimilation is not necessary. He could have preserved his cultural difference and would have fully qualified to have a Canadian identity by being the way he had been.

Squatter

'Squatter' tells the story of a character who attempts to erase his Indian identity. Nandini Bhautoo-Dewnarain critically evaluates the story as a critique of post-independence Indians and the process of 'othering'. She remarks:

The story of Sarosh's evacuation problems in his host country is deliberately absurd and is meant to be read against the numerous narratives of immigration of a factual, official and fictional nature. (14)

Lend Me Your Light

The story "Lend Me Your Light" considers in depth the question of the ethnic identity of immigrants. It is prefixed with an epigraph from Tagore and compares three attitudes to the Old and New worlds through the characters of Jamshed, who immigrates to America and despises everything Indian, Percy Boyce, who leaves Bombay to work for the uplift of farmers in rural India, and Kersi, his brother, who has chosen to immigrate to Canada but can sympathise with his brother's choice as well. Jamshed remains a haughty snob, bemoaning the fact that *jhatis* voice was flooding all India institutions; while Kersi feels ashamed of the word *jhati* "oozing the stench of bigotry" while "consigned a whole race to the mute role of coolie and menials, forever "unredeemable" (164).

Life in Little India

This last question seems to be one that Mistry, an immigrant, asks himself. Kersi writes to Jamshed, describing that segment of Toronto known as Little India, without confessing that the place left him "feeling extremely ill at ease and ashamed, wondering why all this did not make me feel homesick (181). The three of them meet again at Kersi's parent's flat; Jamshed and Kersi, home on a visit, and Percy, home unexpectedly, following the murder of his friend and fellow social worker at the hands of moneylenders from whom they had been trying to save the farmers. They discover that they have nothing really to say to each other. On his return to Toronto, Kersi is aghast at discovering that his visit had not helped him to sort out the basic values, which sustained him as an immigrant.

Swimming Lessons – Abundant Cultural Signs in a Foreign Land



The final story in the collection, “Swimming Lessons”, which is structurally the most complex of the stories, portrays Kersi as having taken yet another step in the process of adaptation, without losing his roots, because, as Margaret Atwood puts it, “Refusing to acknowledge where you come from is an act of amputation you may become . . . a citizen of the world . . . but only at the cost of arms, legs or heart” (113).

Kersi attempts to yoke the realities of existence in Bombay and Toronto and discover the true essence of human existence, which is the same everywhere, beneath superficial differences of colour, race and nationality. Kersi while working as a clerk in the insurance company, enrolls himself for swimming lessons in the high school behind his apartment. The Chowpatty Beach near his house in Bombay is too dirty to arouse such passion in him.

The disposal of coconuts and clay gods and goddesses by the Hindus, ashes of the sacred sandalwood fire and the leftovers of the dead men by the Parsis in the sea reflects the Indian cultural practices and the squalid sea water contrasts the clear blue water of the high school swimming pool in Toronto. The women he sees sunbathing from his upper floor window, upon closer inspection, turn out to be rather unattractive with “wrinkled skin, ageing hands, sagging bottoms, varicose veins. The lustrous trick of sun and lotion and distance has ended” (233). This is as true of the lust of the West as it is of these sunbathing women. The next disillusionment for the immigrant comes when the woman in the swimming pool reveals her pubic hair only to hide them during subsequent encounters.

Symbols of Life

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The swimming pool and the eponymous swimming lessons provide Mistry with the opportunity to elaborate upon water as the symbol of life. Water is here the primal amniotic fluid, the medium in which Kersi is finally reborn into his new life. The failure to learn swimming in Canada is linked to earlier inability to master the sea on the Chowpatty Beach in Bombay. These failures could symbolize the failure of Kersi, and through him most Parsis, to assimilate either Indian or Western Diasporas. However, by the end of the story, Kersi is able to open his eyes underwater in his bathtub and see life in a double perspective Indian and Western.

Though Kersi rejects the squalor of Bombay, which he views symbolically through dark glasses as he boards the plane to Canada, full of glorious dreams about a rosy-tinted life there, his subsequent nostalgia for Bombay, his family and friends, seems to be Mistry's own. He struggled to come to terms with his cultural heritage, even as he attempts to adapt to his environment.

Parsi Coloring

Rohinton Mistry uses a number of Parsi terms in every story and refers profusely to Parsi customs, beliefs, superstitions and religious rituals. As Uma Parameswaran points out, "Mistry has bolstered the India-in-Canada reality by confidently using Parsi words without either glossary or textual explanations such as resorted to by earlier writers of Commonwealth Literature" (21).

One finds a skilful portrayal of this yearning backward and a looking forward in Mistry's fiction. His writing is governed by the experience of being a Parsi, a diasporic minority community in India, and the predicament of being an immigrant in Canada.

In *Tales from Firozsha Baag*, Rohinton creates a fictional Parsi en-clave, Firozsha Baag, in metropolitan Bombay. With richness of detail and subtle irony, he evokes a Parsi world – with its customs and traditions, conventions and food habits. With deftness, he displays the Parsi mentality of remaining confined to themselves, and with wit and humour, their erotic, cultural, as well as scatological details. The stories are disparate, and yet interwoven. They share the same Parsi locale and mood, yet each distinctly unfolds different aspects of Parsi specificity.

At one level, the author describes the experience of being a Parsi in India, and on another level, he deals with the class hierarchies, patriarchal power and other patterns of empowerment within this Parsi world.

New Homeland in the Backdrop of Firozsha Baag

From Firozsha Baag, Mistry takes us to his new homeland, Canada, in “Squatter”. The protagonist of this story is shown as facing the problem of adjusting himself to the Western-style toilets and thereby undergoes severe mental agony because of it. “Lend Me Your Light” relates the story of two immigrants, Kersi who relinquishes his dream to return to his homeland and settles down as a young writer, and the other, Sarosh who fails to fit in the Canadian multicultural mosaic and takes his final flight to India. The last tale, “Swimming Lessons”, gives us the most enthralling picture of the predicament of an immigrant in Canada. Despite Canada’s policy of promoting multiculturalism, the racism rife in Canada is brought to the fore through Kersi’s experience at the swimming classes. As Kersi narrates:

As I enter the showers three young boys, probably from a previous class, emerge. One of them holds his nose. The second begins to hum, under his breath : Paki, smell like curry.

The third says to the first two: pretty soon all the water’s going to taste of curry. They leave. (238)

Elsewhere, he feels that the “swimming pool is the hangout of some racist group, bent on eliminating all non-white swimmers, to keep their waters pure and their white sisters unogled”. In an interview with Dagmar Novak, Mistry says that although multiculturalism is supposed to promote peace and harmony, it fails to do so.

Looking Back at the Home Land from Different Angles

Mistry’s emigrant experiences make him think of his own native land from different angles. As a creative writer, his expatriate experience leads him to compare India and Canada. Like his characters he too emigrated to Canada in order to earn money and lead a prosperous life. The alienation he feels in the new land and his attachment to the homeland

often come in conflict with each other. As he experiences a sense of alienation, he wishes to come back to India and rejoin his community. He compares his native land with a multi-cultural nation like Canada.

Centuries-old Parsi Loyalty

Most Parsi writers who have emigrated to other countries focus on identity crisis as a principal theme. There is a sense of loss and a feeling of nostalgia in them. The rootlessness, insecurity and adverse financial conditions are the factors that place the emigrants in the three short stories in *Tales from Firozsha Baag* under pressure. The absence of a sense of home creates anger and resentment in the migrants.

Rohinton Mistry, therefore, successfully evokes a sense of loss and nostalgia in the immigrant's experience and the alienation of Parsis in India. Through the characters' sufferings Mistry portrays the progress of meaningless protagonists attached only by their own self towards a realization of humanity and responsibility.

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