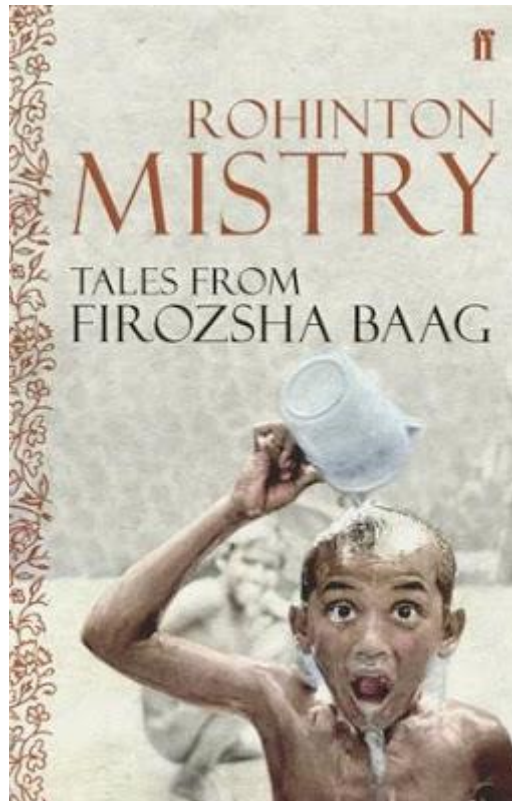


Tales From Firozsha Baag:
An Intricate Analysis in the Relativity of Ethnicity and Culture

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Abstract

Rohinton Mistry was born in 1952 in Mumbai and migrated to Canada in 1975. He worked in a bank to support himself while studying English and Philosophy at the University of Toronto, where he received a second bachelor's degree in 1984. Although an immigrant, an outsider in Canadian Society, Mistry always understood this condition, for in India he belonged to the Parsi community. After a few years in Canada, he started writing stories and gained immediate attention, receiving two Hart House literary prizes and *Canadian Fiction Magazine's* annual contributor's Prize in 1985. Two years later, Penguin Books Canada published a collection of eleven stories titled *Tales from Firozsha Baag*, which appeared in 1989 in the United States as *Swimming Lessons and Other Stories from Firozsha Baag*. Most of the stories had little to do with his experience as an immigrant in Canada, but focused instead on the uneventful lives of a group of Parsis who live in a ramshackle Bombay

apartment block. The stories reflect the characteristics of the Parsi community, struggling to balance old world Parsi values with changing times and circumstances. Mistry explores the relationships at the heart of this community, their cultural identity and the uniqueness of their community living while also shedding light on the syncretic nature of the diasporic Parsi experience whether in North America or in India.

Firozsha Baag

The middle class Parsis who inhabit the residential block known as Firozsha Baag come to life in these eleven intersecting stories, just as the building itself takes on an embodiment of its own. Robert L Ross comments on its structure:

Placing the characters for the most part within the confines of the apartment and allowing them to appear in more than one story lends the work strong structure and makes it more like a novel than a collection of separate pieces. The principal element that connects the action stems from the common Parsi religion, whose roots were in Persia and whose adherents were driven out of that country once Islam attained dominance. The now dwindling community of around 50,000 came to India some 1,300 years ago and was allowed to stay if they promised not to practice conversion; the largest settlement remains in Bombay. While the Parsis have contributed to Indian society, especially in business, far in excess of their number, and have never been persecuted, they continue to live outside the mainstream and strive to retain their distinct identity in a predominantly Hindu country. Their religious practices, based on tradition intrude in all avenues of their lives and appear at times to be more the product of the latter than the spirit. (240-41)

Younger Residents

The younger residents in Firozsha Baag rebel the older ones fear the encroachment of a changing world. This conflict between religious tradition and personal fluidity creates the tension in each of the stories, such portrayal turns into a miniature portrait, precise and accurate, so that the Baag's dwellers represent Parsis in discord with their religious beliefs and the larger community. Amin Malak, in a review of the book, notes that, "The writer's sympathies preclude his condemning or disowning his culture in its entirety, and the humorous rendition of character and incident makes the criticism poignantly effective and lasting" (103).

Auspicious Occasion

The first story in the Firozsha Baag collection is “Auspicious Occasion” and is immediately engaged in identity construction. The main characters are the fifty year old, toothless but successful lawyer Rustomji, and his wife Mehroo who is twenty years younger. The action takes place on Behran roje, a sacred day for the Parsis and especially auspicious to Mehroo who was born on that day, had her navjole performed on that day and her also been married on that day. Now, fourteen years after her marriage, Mehroo’s attempts to observe the day in all its sanctity in the orthodox manner were frustrated by several events, trivial and major. She goes to the prayer meeting on the “auspicious occasion” of the title of the story, discovers that the old man has been murdered and returns home. Meanwhile, someone spits red paan juice from a bus on Rustomji who is also on the way to the temple, magnificently dressed in traditional white Parsi dress, and his anger only provokes a hostile crowd to jeer at him. As he sits musing on the easy chair at home later, Mehroo is touched by the “rare glimpse of the softness underneath his tough exterior and he sips the tea she makes for him. She feels very close to him” (21). Thus the inauspicious calamities of the day serve to bring the couple closer together in a rare moment of mutual understanding which highlights the deep bond holding them together despite superficial differences. This makes the day auspicious after all.

The quarrel that ensues between the enraged Rustomji and the irate mob provides a quasi-funny situation where very native choice abuses are hurled about contributing to local colour and an increase in the Indian-English vocabulary. The generous sprinkling of “native” words throughout the tale makes it not just Indian but also specifically “Parsi” whose life at the Firozsha Baag is being authentically recalled by Mistry-Behamroje, dungli, Pheytoe, navjote, dhandar-paato, Sali-boti, Ioban, Oilchee, Ashen Vahoo and so on.

Thus in “Auspicious Occasion”, ethnicity, Zoroastrian religious rituals, 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 story. This makes it “show-window” discourse for the expression of Parsiness or Parsipanu as Parsis themselves would put it in the Gujarati language. The Parsis in this story are presented warts and all without any attempt at airbrushing. What is also significant is that not only does this story not sentimentalize the Parsis but that it also is in a sense a myth-busier. Parsis, thanks to their colonial closeness to the master race and their industrial baron’s reputation, continue to be perceived as rich and prosperous. The Parsis in Firozsha Baag were middleclass and like other middle class persons in Bombay have to engage in daily

battle with intermittent water supply, dilapidated homes, peeling paint, falling plaster and leaking WCs.

Rustomji

Rustomji expresses the general Parsi view of most Indians being “uneducated, filthy, ignorant barbarians” (15). His encounter with the “ghaatis” (a derogatory term for Indians from the Western Ghats) at the bus stop focuses on the confrontation between the Parsi identity and the Indian identity. In this encounter Rustomji has to resort to playing the clown to escape being physically assaulted by the crowd. This is a pointer to the downgrading of the Parsi elite in postcolonial India.

In spite of all this nostalgia and reconstruction of memory, there is little sentimentalisation in Mistry’s text. He is very clear eyed about how much or how little these rituals mean to the Parsis. He is also fairly critical about the Parsi priest, who he sees as rather human and consequently as often lascivious men. This would not be a common viewpoint and would be considered subversive by most Parsis, who would rather prescribe to Mehroo’s belief in Dustoor Dhunjisha being a rather holy man.

Behind Rustomji’s self-directed joke lies the trauma of the realization that in spite of the Parsis continued belief in their superior status in post colonial India they have been downgraded to the unenviable status of a has been community of eccentric old men and women. Thus for Rustomji and his co-religionists, the coming of freedom for India has meant a lowering of lifestyle and consequent despair of the possibility of any future in independent India. This disillusionment and despair informs not just this story, but most others in this collection of short stories and it is this that has led not just Mistry’s protagonists, but himself too, to take the route out of India and into a Western diaspora.

One Sunday

The other story, “One Sunday” ostensibly deals with the entry of a thief into the flat of an old widow, Najamai, who lived alone. The thief is none other than Francis, an out-of-work man who did odd jobs for the flat dwellers. But it was Francis who has taught Kersi to fly kites, spin tops and shoot marbles, just as his father taught him bicycling and cricket, and was hence a father figure to him too. When he hears that the thief was Francis, he feels “angry and betrayed” and succumbing to a “flush of heroics” (34). He offers to find him. He sets out with his brother, armed with cricket bats. Francis is caught and beaten up by the crowd that gathers. “But Kersi was horrified. This was not the way he had wanted it to end ... He looked away where their eyes met” (34)

Not all Parsis are elites. Contrary to general Indian perceptions, the majority of the Parsis are not rich. Not all of them have access to upper middle class domestic conveniences like refrigerators let alone the privilege of owning a car. This was especially true in the 1960s and 70s—the period in which Mistry has set his stories and novels. The general economic trends and socialist ethos, that then pervaded India, did not favour imported good and luxury items. Hence, consumer items were scarce and expensive. This meant that a very few of the tenants of Firozsha Baag owned refrigerator. Najmai owned one. She lived alone and she used the fridge mainly as a ready source of ice cubes for her midday drink of chilled lemonade and her evening scotch and soda. The Boyce family, blessed with two growing boys, made a more substantial use of the fridge and stored their weekly supply of beef in the freezer compartment, neatly divided into seven packets. Unlike Hindus most Parsis eat beef, even though the cow is sacred to both religions. Coming to the beating of Francis, who was hiding in tar Gully (Lane), Kersi with other boys came to find him out. But the Parsis are unwelcome in this area. They were resented as representing the race that considered it superior to them. The boys were taunted with “Parsi Bawajil Cricket at night?” Parsi Bawajil. What will you hit boundary or sixer?” (35). The boys retaliated with “bloody ghatis” (35). The term *ghati* is a descriptive term for people, who live in the Western Ghats, but as used by the Parsis, acquired a pejorative sense and generally means an uncouth, barbaric person.

At the end of this story too, the noise and action are resolved in quiet disgust and pathos. Najmai discovers a pool of urine behind the door where Francis had been hiding. So the prospective prey realizes that the predator had probably been more frightened than her. Kersi, the brave rat killer, wretches his innards out in the bathroom and comes to the conclusion that smashing a man’s head is rather different from killing a rat.

The Ghost of Firozsha Baag

“The Ghost of Firozsha Baag” has a non-Parsi narrator. This change of voice means a change of perspective and lead to an external perspective on the Parsis of Firozsha Baag. The narrator here is a Goan woman, Jacqueline-known as Jaykaylee to her Parsi bosses. Before the supply of women servants from Goa dried up—it was diverted to the Gulf countries from the 1970s onwards—it was almost *de rigueur* for Parsis to have what they called ‘Goanese’ ayahs for their ‘Baby and Babas’. This was part of the heritage of having been colonial elite. In the words of Jaykaylee herself, “They thought they were like British only, ruling India, side by side” (46).

Jaykaylee

Jaykaylee's duties included being a cook, so her Seth, whom she has looked after ever since he was a baba and his wife were able to justly partake of the curries whipped up by her. These curries and spices ground for them are the leitmotif that runs through this story. The act of grinding the masalas, cooking the curry and then eating it are very obvious sexual symbols of sensuality and satiation. The sexual undercurrent linked to cooking and eating is projected onto the co-called "the Ghost of Firozsha Baag".

This ghost can be viewed as an overt projection of Jaykaylee's suppressed sexuality and resultant sexual frustration. This frustration was further fuelled by Jaykaylee's unvoiced resentment of the way in which her Bai and Seth had mangled her name. The mangling of Jacqueline's name is just one more example of how Parsis had domesticated English. Jaykaylee herself admits that her Bai says "igeechur" for easy chair and "Ferach beech" for French beans. This is an indication that Parsi acceptance of English/European mores was not unproblematic and very often the strange was familiarized before it was accepted.

Ethno-Religious Details

The ethno-religious detailing in this collection of stories, which began with Behram-roj and visits to agiaries is now extended to funeral rites in the story entitled "Condolence Visit". Following the Parsi custom, friends and relations were expected to pay a condolence visit to the bereaved family. These visits in the time-honoured manner would begin after the *dusmoo* or the tenth day ceremonies in honour of the departed soul. So, Daulat, the newly widowed Parsi, in a very pragmatic fashion begins to prepare for this influx. She steels herself for the thousands of questions the visitors would ask and the pain she would have to endure in repeating and thereby reliving the trauma and tragedy of the last days of her husband Minocher.

Daulat's neighbour Najamai-she of the refrigerator fame-offers to help out by lending her chairs to cope with the flow of visitors. Daulat is annoyed but restrains her anger by reminding herself hoe lonely Najamai as and how she usually meant well-Najamai like several ageing Parsis in Bombay had children who lived abroad and rarely visited home, Najamai's two daughters Vera and Dolly had gone abroad for higher studies leaving her absolutely alone. This carryover of characters from one story to another provides a commonality between them. There are also other features that link the stories in this collection to one another-ethnic detailing, alienation from post colonial India, immigration to the West-especially Canada, lonely old men and women and identity-confusion among the young.

Condolence Visit

Another common trope deals with the question of superstition and blind dogma that besets the Parsi Zoroastrian community. In “Condolence Visit”, the focus is on superstitions and rituals connected with death and funeral rites. Daulat, in spite of her grief stricken condition stands up bravely to the demands made upon her by dogma and ritual as prescribed by “concerned” relations and neighbours. With reference to the oil lamp she had lit by the bedside of her late husband, Daulat takes evasive measures to evade the criticism of her neighbour Najamai. According to Parsi orthodoxy, the lamp should be extinguished after the fourth day-charam-ceremonies. This would enable the soul to sever ties with this world and go “quickly, quickly... to the next world. With the lamp still burning the soul will be attracted to two different places: here and the next world. So you must put it out, you are confusing the soul” (64). This is the advice of Najamai. Daulat gets around this objection by shutting the bedroom door so that burning lamp would not offend the eyes of the orthodox.

Daulat sorts out Minocher’s *pugree*, the tall, black hat worn by Parsi men on ceremonial occasions such as Weddings and *navjotes*. This *pugree* was a particularly splendid specimen and well preserved. Young Parsi men no longer wore *pugrees* at their wedding and new ones were thus not manufactured any more. This made Minochar’s *pugree* an antique piece and rather valuable. So, instead of letting it rot away and then have it thrown out after her death, Daulat decided to give it away to someone who would value it. The opportune reading of a small advertisement in the Parsi newspaper, Jam-e-Jamshed, where the advertiser wanted just such a *pugree*, made Daulat call him up, in the hope that Minocher’s *pugree* would find a fitting home. This little by-play allows Mistry to offer his usual understated comment on the jettisoning of traditions and traditional garb by present day Parsis. To Daulat’s relief, a young man arrives. This horrified Moti and Najamai. “Minicher’s *pugree* being sold and the man barely digested by vultures at the tower of silence” (74). They both tried to influence the young buyer into leaving but Daulat was adamant and not only does she makes him try on the *pugree* but also refuses to accept any payment for it. “It is yours, wear it in good health. And take good care of it for my Minocher” (76).

Canadian Stories

Some of the stories in Tales from Firozsha Baag are the three Canadian stories, set wholly or partially in Canada and which display to the maximum extent the “periscopic vision” of the diasporic writer foregrounded by Salman Rushdie in his critical essays, *Imaginary Homelands*. They are “Squatter”, “Lend Me Your Light” and “Swimming Lessons”. The master story teller of Firozsha

Baag, Nariman Hansotia, narrates “Squatter”. He begins the story of the squatter by framing it within the story of the valorous Savuksha the mighty cricketer and hunter. The swashbuckling Parsi of yore thus offsets the shame and ignominy of the contemporary Parsi immigrant to the West. Savuksha had single-handedly salvaged the prestige of the touring Indian cricket team by whacking whatever the English bowlers sent him, all round the field with complete impunity. One of Savuksha’s shot hit an English fielder on the hand he had put out to stop the ball and the impact has caused him to ball.

Hansotia in “Squatter” instead narrates the story of the squatter, a cautionary tale for young Parsis enamoured of the West and seeking emigration out of India. In this story, we have the tragic-comic story of Sarosh/Sid. The glorious opening of Savuksha’s story is contrasted with the pathetic posture adopted by Sid-as he climbs up onto the toilet seat in his Canadian home every morning to void his bowels. The recalcitrant bowels refuse to keep pace with the metamorphosis of Sarosh into Sid, and insist on the squatting position before emptying themselves out. This scatological opening is an ironic comment on the immigrant’s identity-construction and identity –confusion. She/he may at the surface level mimic the Western mores and picture him/herself in the mirror of the white world, but the inner self is often reluctant to keep pace with the outward, cosmetic changes and masks adopted to conform to a new identity.

Almost ten years in Canada, Sarosh cannot get his bowels to perform in a seated position. This causes him endless trauma, as before leaving for Canada, he had grandly promised himself, his family and friends, “... If I do not become completely Canadian in exactly ten years from the time I land there, then I will come back” (155).

This promise now haunts him as he strains every morning on the seat and finally hopes on it to finish the job. But at the end of the ten years approached, in increasing despair Sarosh refuses to adopt the squatting position and this delays his reporting to work in the morning. Also, throughout the day, the faintest twinge in his abdomen would drive the wretched Sarosh to the toilet to try his luck; the job could only be accomplished in the squatting position. This, however, leads to considerable embarrassment.

Sarosh, however, decides to go back to India. Just as the plane is beginning to move down the runway, Sarosh feels “A tiny rumble inside him” (160). Ignoring the “please return to your seat and fasten your seat belt” sign, Sarosh labours in the washroom. As the plane rolls down the runway, Sarosh’s past life flashes before his eyes and just as rain started falling with a huge thunderclap outside,

inside the cramped aircraft toilet, Sarosh for the first time in ten years is able to perform without squatting.

Hansotia, the story teller, winds up this section of the story but there is more to come after his jubilation and celebrations organized by his mother for his return to the fold, Sarosh finds himself as lonely as he used to be in Canada. This is the quintessential condition of the immigrant, at home neither in the East nor in the West-like Rushdie's creations; Mistry's men and women are also in a sense people who live on the margins and peripheries of their chosen locations.

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, Persy 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 the *ghatis* voice flooding all India institutions; while Kersi feels ashamed of the word *ghati* "oozing the stench of bigotry" while "consigned a whole race to the mute role of coolie and menials, forever unredeemable" (164).

The last question seems to be one that Mistry, the 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 parents' 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 each other. On his return to Toronto, Kersi is aghast to discover that his visit had not helped him to sort out the basic values, which sustained life as an immigrant.

Use of Parsi Terms and Ethnicity

Rohinton Mistry uses a number of Parsi terms in every story and refers profusely to Parsi customs, beliefs, superstitions and religiously 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).

Mistry's protagonist's displays are the ethno-religious details of *navjotes*, *behram roj*, *celebrations*, *agiary gings*, *kutsi-weavings* etc. Kersi refers to "Little India" in Toronto, the Zoroastrian society of Ontario, the Parsi New Year celebration in Canada-all of which may be considered the external manifestations of his ethnic identity. Coming to the internal aspects, we feel that Mistry is steeped in his Parsi/Indian heritage. Even when he pokes fun at some aspects of its, it is the gentle, affectionate mockery of something that is nonetheless very close to his heart.

Rainbow-like

The final impression left on the reader by *Tales from Firozsha Baag* is that of having viewed a myriad of shifting patterns in a kaleidoscope, which nevertheless blend, into a beautiful rainbow-like whole. It is a test of Mistry's talent that he is able to bring together the best elements of life in two worlds, so far apart, so different, and yet not so different after all. His keen psychological insight which enables him to read the unspoken subtext beneath words and actions, and his success in integrating two identities, combine to make the *Tales from Firozsha Baag*, a complex study in what Keith terms "the relativity of cultures".

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