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Art and Artifice in the ‘Tales from Firozsha Baag’ by Rohinton Mistry

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Abstract:

Rohinton Mistry is a contemporary Indian Parsi writer and presently settled in Canada. He is a writer with exceptional skill and imaginative power. He is a diasporic writer who is equally aware of the Parsis’ glorious past and their present dilemmas. He obtained a degree in Mathematics and Economics from the University of Bombay, and later enrolled himself at the University of Toronto to pursue a degree in English and Philosophy and eventually chose the career of a writer in Canada. The ‘Tales from Firozsha Baag’ is the first collection of short stories by Rohinton Mistry. He has subsequently written numerous novels like ‘Such a Long Journey’, ‘A Fine Balance’, ‘Family Matters’. His stories need special attention because in them, we have the first assurance of a promising writer with preoccupations and recurring issues which find a detailed treatment in his later novels. These short stories deal with existential burdens of present day Parsis and their children in terms of their past glory and present travails. The awareness of roots, ethnic crisis, faith and search for balance are some of the significant themes which recur in various stories.

Keywords: Contemporary, Imaginative, Diasporic, Dilemmas, Preoccupations, Travails.

Rohinton Mistry belongs to the group of Indian Parsi writers (Diasporic) who spent their lives in the old Bombay (Mumbai), and moved away from there because of specific pressures and pulls, and settled in Canada. He enjoys a unique status among diasporic writers because of his particular identity as a Parsi writer who is aware of his community’s glorious past and erosion of status after Independence and, more particularly, after the dominance of the regime of Indira Gandhi, culminating in events like the liberation of Bangladesh, declaration of emergency and rise of Hindu fundamentalism in the wake of the expansion of Shiv Sena and other parochial forces.

Despite the quick absorption of the English language and education, the Parsis failed to integrate with the local population and very soon faced the common fate of minorities in terms of humiliation, mockery and isolation. Prof. Nilufer E. Bharucha, a distinguished Parsi academician and Professor of English in Bombay University, beautifully remarked, "At the end of Empire, the Parsis lost their special and privileged condition and, specially during the post-emergency period, many of them migrated to European countries and America for better pastures and openings". (Bharucha 73-88) Thus, we find two kinds of portrayals of the fate of Parsis in their literary efforts. Sometimes, they are described as models of selfless service to the country and the whole community, but other times, they are depicted as vain-glorious, self-centered parasites living in the past and enjoying the luxury of Posh hotels, and costly hospitals with unique rooms. We find all aspects of the memory of the painful past, subsequent dominance in British India and subsequent fall from grace in Post-modern India. Bapsi Sidhwa and Rohinton Mistry both belong to the later phases of Parsi writers who have addressed two significant problems of contemporary Parsis living in India/Pakistan because of their passive submission to old religious rituals and false sense of prestige and the rising religious fundamentalism in both countries with tacit support from the ruling elite and political party. Rohinton Mistry demonstrates the sad plight of Parsis living in Post-modern India who face two major problems viz. the pressures from the traditional elderly Parsi representatives and the impatient young Parsis trying to rebel and move out of their old country to Europe and America. This has been manifested in their novels, stories, plays, poems and critical writings.

However, I would like to concentrate on the stories of Rohinton Mistry with particular reference to his tales entitled "Tales from Firozsha Baag" (1987). The book in question consists of eleven long stories dealing with the lives of Parsis in a particular complex of Bombay who experience various kinds of problems. Some of these are certainly of their own creation. In fact, these eleven stories provide a kind of microcosm of the lives of Middle class Parsi tenants and residents who face various kinds of common problems such as inadequate water supply, fading paints, leaking roofs, various petty prejudices, domestic quarrels, exploitation of servants and local helps. These tales are pretty fascinating revelations, to the uninitiated readers, of the daily routines and chores of Parsis in terms of their domestic deeds, prayers, festivals, frequent quarrels with their neighbours, officials and also of their fears and misgivings about domestic helps, ayahs, plumbers, vendors and several other local inhabitants. These stories have interlinked themes and

some characters reappear in subsequent stories and like Chaucer's 'Prologue' to Canterbury Tales, they provide an example of 'God's plenty', absorbing accounts of diversity of individuals, both male and female, among the Parsis of Bombay of the decades of 70s and 80s. Mistry certainly deserves credit for being 'impartial' in his observations, and portrayal. He demonstrates that the young Parses are pretty apprehensive about their future and are, therefore, in no mood to abide by the advice and the directives of their parents and relatives.

It is very imperative to examine how Mistry manages to convince his readers by using the devices of memory, dialogue, dramatic illusion, allusions, mimicry, slang, code switching/code mixing, distortions of rules of syntax, use of mythical method, circular structure and recurring imagery, metaphors and evocative symbols. A well-known critic observes, "They are born storytellers; in his tales, Mistry depicts Middle Class life among the Parsi community, as he recalls it from abroad." (Bhautoo-Dewnarain 1) It is to be noted that all these intersecting stories are located in an apartment (block) of a Parsi Complex in Bombay. In fact, in every story, each narrator renders an account of dealing with a couple, his children and neighbour, and it is believed that the narrator of each tale is a kind of narrator-participant. The author tells the last one, authenticating that he himself belongs to Firozsha Baag, though he is presently residing in Canada. These stories provide a beautiful introduction to his subsequent novels, which chronicle extensively the rise and fall of Bombay's Parsis, who once enjoyed a life of luxury, opulence and privileges but, in the decades of the 70s and 80s, the parses suffered the loss of prestige and trust and feared the prospect of a gloomy future, leading to their eventual disappearance and exit and exile in various countries of Europe and America in general and, Canada in particular. Last, but not least, it needs to be stressed that in some of these stories ('Auspicious Occasion', 'Condolence Visit', 'The Paying Guests', 'The Ghost of Firozsha Baag'), the writer shows that Parsis are living in a world of phantasy and exclusive aloofness. However, they are often unaware of the fact that they are, at times, guilty of exploiting the low-class people and domestic help, ayahs and other local people. Similarly, it also becomes clear that the senior Parsis rely too much on their beliefs in the power of prayers, values of formal dress and elaborate rituals. However, it tells on the nerves of those who are forced to follow them in letter and spirit. (Condolence Visit). In some stories such as 'Squatter', 'The Collectors', 'Of White Hairs and Cricket' and 'Swimming Lessons' etc., we come across issues of multiculturalism, double displacement, the fragility of human relationships, mortality and the painful reality of trying to 'belong' and 'adapt' to the ways of reconciliation in

an alien society. The metaphors of 'melting pot' and 'two cupboards' are beautifully paralleled by the allusive image of Tiresias, a blind man trying to adjust 'between' two lives and are needed for exposure of claims of multiculturalism of the Canadian government regarding granting equal and fair opportunity to all non-resident immigrants from Asia. Their fear of failure to integrate is also beautifully presented in a remark of Sarosh (later changed to Sid) on the eve of his departure for Canada: "If I do not become completely Canadian in exactly ten years from the time I land there, then I will come back". (Mistry 187) However, the next story, 'Swimming Lessons' clearly shows that it is easier said than done. Even in the story, 'Squatter', the narrator, Nariman Hansotia exaggerates the painful attempts of an Indian Parsi to behave decently in a Western commode inside a lavatory with genuine humour. He detects in it a trace of hidden racism towards Asians who are uncomfortable 'Squatters' inside a Washroom. Similarly, in 'The Swimming Lessons', Mistry's last story from the selection, written in a 'dialogic' form the author shows that like Firozsha Complex in Bombay, there is a Dons Mill apartment in Canada where people of different nationalities live. But, the young man, Kersi Boyce speaks of his complex experiences in Canada where everything is sanitized and clean but people there live in silence without genuine communication. Not only this, the instructions show that the Canadian government does not live up to its claim of equal opportunity and fairness. At Chaupatty beach in Bombay, he had a different kind of experience where he enjoys the flash of waves, even though the beach was dirty and contained all kind of filth caused by spillover of chopped coconut and remnants of food packets and flowers etc. Thus, Kersi Boyce never learns to swim in Bombay because of inhibition with filth and dirt but his allergy continues in Canada for a different reason. He speaks of his horror in a neat and clean Canadian beach because of hidden racism. Mistry narrates, "As I enter the showers, three young boys emerge. One of them holds his nose. The second begins to hum, under his breath: Paki Paki, smell like Curry...." (Mistry 286)

This story is thus a compelling rendering of the shock of 'Cultural displacement', experienced in an apartment in Canada. Only the memory at Chaupatty beach and other inmates in Firozsha Baag provide some consolations. These two stories, taken together, provide a picture of contrasted ways of living, highlighting the difficulties of adjustment in an alien atmosphere/surroundings. Mistry had earlier commented in 'Squatter' through Nariman, the storyteller, "The Multicultural Department is a Canadian invention.... If you ask me, mosaic and melting pot are both nonsense, and ethnic is a polite way of saying bloody foreigner". (Mistry 194)

Similarly, in the present story, 'Swimming Lessons', the subtle kind of racism is suggested through Kersi: "May be the swimming pool is a hangout of some racist group, bent on eliminating all non-white swimmers, to keep their waters pure and their white sisters unogled". (Mistry 288)

In an earlier story 'One Sunday', there is again a similar juxtaposition of multiple viewpoints, presented through the 'polyphonic' voices of finale characters Najamai, Tehmina, Boyce, Kersi and Francis who are given freedom to voice their own opinions. In 'The Collectors', there is also a device of parallelism inserted between the present and past, described by the linear method of narration through Dr Mody and Jahangir but the issue of 'Spanish dancing lady stamp' brings an element of surprise, but in terms of narrative technique, 'Of White Hairs and Cricket' is a far better story where the previous character Percy is shown to be maturing and here the imagery of journey through a Bombay public transport bus is used very artistically, and the narrator's maturing experience is again presented through the legend of Tiresias, a blind man claiming to be endowed with vision, and yet throbbing between 'two lives'.

Similarly, Rohinton Mistry uses the serio-comical device in dealing with the lives of 'the other' small subaltern people like Goanese Aya (Jaqueline), Jayakalee, Francis, De Souza, the Dastur and rigid old male masters through the device of black humour, exaggeration, mimicry for registering their protests and different reactions to the happenings. In fact, slang, abuses of minor characters, and funny stories and dramatic postures of Nariman Hansotia and the occasional use of allegorical and 'carnavalesque' techniques of juxtaposing all kinds of reactions for the sake of verisimilitude and illusion speak volumes of Rohinton Mistry's skill off narration and recurrent imagery of water, light, ghost, informal dress, formal, Washroom and Water lend an air of authenticity to these narratives. One knowledgeable critic rightly commented, "Mr. Mistry stops out of frame to comment on artistic patterning of lives' material, both past and future He uses his Toronto apartment house to evoke Firozsha Baag, implying that violent break of his immigration has, in some way been headed, made more of circular process." (Cooke 26)

From the previous discussion of the main stories, it appears to me that certain recurring themes such as the role of tradition and faith, nostalgia, the problems of conflict between the older people with rigid postures and attitudes contrasted by the dilemmas of the young and decision to migrate causing problems of exile alienation and adjustment are some of the main issues and preoccupations of Rohinton Mistry. The Khodadbad Building becomes a microcosm of Bombay's Parsi community within physical boundaries with cultural barriers. The writer deserves praise for

dealing with various ritualistic beliefs and practices which define the ethnic Parsi minority of Bombay. The writer deliberately refrains from delving into their origin and success stories during British India. Instead of dealing with the lives of successful political and business personalities and legal luminaries, he chooses to concentrate on the life of the ordinary Parsi (Middle-class people) who live on the margins and face the realities of life without much nostalgia and mythical glories. Mistry does not sentimentalize or idealize the Parsis but treats their existential burdens without trying to hide their limitations, prejudices, and other faults. The narrative strategies also vary from story to story, and the protagonists keep changing. Sometimes, the focus is on the male characters, while at other times, the perspective shifts from the male character to female characters. He also deals with the subaltern people who similarly suffer at the hands of their employers. For example, in the story, 'Auspicious Occasion', the writer concentrates on a serio-comic situation in the daily routine of the protagonist Rustomji and his leaking toilet roof. He is a typical and unique character who is both a victim and oppressor. He constantly complains of inattention and irresponsibilities of the government, but he is a typical example of certain minorities who have a pessimistic attitude to life and blame the public authorities without being aware of their concerns and initiatives. His domestic quarrels and differences with his tolerant wife Mehroo suggest that he is a victim of snobbery, hypocrisy and inconsistency. While he is irreverential to the priest, he cherishes a delusion of decency and cultural values. In public life, he plays the role of a bully and a victim, according to his convenience. For example, when he is attacked after the murder of a priest, he blames the rowdy elements of Maharashtrian Shiv Sainiks but does not realize that the murder was the outcome of inner division among the Parsis. The plot of the story follows a linear method of progression but the writer manages to interact between the dramatic life and the outer world in a very persuasive manner and shows that the protagonist, Rustomji is a typical Parsi grumbler who blames the government and landlord for all minor complaints such as the leaking roof, defective plumbing and falling plaster etc. He is, in fact, a prototype of an old Parsi character who appears frequently in the novels in a more tolerable form. The writer's sympathy is reserved for his wife (Mehroo) who is more tolerant, practical and plays a second fiddle to her dominant husband.

Similarly, in 'One Sunday', we come across a very realistic picture of ordinary old people who are forced to live alone and manage painfully to tide over their small problems of daily life. Here, we have the portrait of a fat older woman, Najmai who lives alone in her flat because her

children have migrated. Thus, she allows two other families (Tehmina and Boyce families) to share her fridge and other accessories. Nevertheless, the story shows that her problems are not eased but complicated because of the activities of her beneficiaries. She is indifferent and powerless to cope with those problems and becomes irritating. This is one story where the writer shows cleverly that the circumstances can turn even a patient victim into a kind of unwilling oppressor. In the, 'The Ghost of Firozsha Baag' the writer presents a further juxtaposition of multiple point of view and here the previous characters join to create an impression of humanity which includes all kinds of people. But, the beauty of the story lies in highlighting, through the first-person narrative technique, the sufferings of a catholic Christian ayah from Goa who has to leave her home and join a Parsi family in search of livelihood. The story is told beautifully in which the forty-nine-year-old lady Jaykalee is telling her own story while working in the kitchen. Her tale reveals that she is subjected to unfair treatment by her landlord. She is overworked and exploited and often made fun of because of her frequent visions of ghosts. She is allowed to sleep in the balcony or the stairs and she is subjected to various kind of mischiefs at frequent intervals. The story is told in the first person and treated as a ghost story in order to tone down her suffering and her problems to be treated as an enjoyable ghost story. In her own story, she clearly reveals that she has lost her identity, language and her name is misspelt and she becomes Jaykalee which she resents but cannot do anything. She is subjected to frequent prayers and exercises by her land lady who once undergoes a similar experience. This story is a beautiful example of a genuine treatment of a subaltern's suffering through the language of 'mimicry' and 'phantasy'.

'Condolence Visit' is yet another story in which the problem of loss and suffering and the ways of survival are beautifully presented through the experiences of a widow named Daulat Mirza. This story shows how an old widow copes with the problems of loss during mechanical observance of rituals forced on her by various relatives and sympathizers. Finally, she sorts out all her departed husband's clothes to orphanage and presents the Crafted pugree to a young man who is going to wed soon. The concluding sentence effectively shows her resolution, "the first round, at least, was definitely hers". (Mistry 91) Thus this story shows that endurance and resistance coexist in the human drama of loss and survival. In 'The Collectors', we have a close parallelism between present and future. In the very first sentence of the introduction to the protagonist, the writer shows that the relationship between Dr. Mody and Jehangir is the outcome of a silent bond and disillusionment with his son and wife. However, such a relationship is not bound to continue,

and this is what happens after two years when Jehangir grows into manhood and loses interest in stamp collection. The old lady's offer of missing stamps containing the picture of a Spanish dancing lady does not interest him anymore. In this way, the story deals with the fragile nature of human relationships based on a sense of bond of emotion, which is difficult to revive after a deep sense of loss.

The narrative technique in the last three stories becomes increasingly complex. This is because though some of the characters reappear, they now mature and react in under the complexities of the situation. Thus, the first-person narrator in the story, 'Lend Me Your Light' is a complex narrator and he is now very different from the boy who played cricket and plucked the hairs of his grandfather with a tweezer. This is because in this story, we find a different portrayal of the boy who is disturbed by the behaviour of his father who is constantly thinking of leaving the country and looking for a job elsewhere. He is always lamenting the passing away of the British era. Not only this, this story also provides an in-depth study of a constant struggle between his grandmother and his parents regarding the requirement of food during childhood. This story is thus a very complex rendering of the bitter-sweet relations of human life, particularly, or the flux of human existence and the burden of growing-up of the young narrator Kersi. In terms of a beautiful literary description of travelling by Bombay's public transport, the writer depicts the complex realities of life without any regret: "As if enacting a scene for my benefit with all the subtlety of a sixteenth-century morality play, a crowd clawed its way into a local train". (Mistry 227) The writer shows that Kersi has now experienced enough of both sides of the coin, viz. poverty/hunger, virtue/vice, and apathy/corruption. In other words, fact and fiction have been blended to show that the previous characters have matured. Apart from these, 'The Paying Guests' is perhaps the weakest story of the suffering of a young couple. The other stories adopt post-modernist and post-colonial devices where the pains of migration and the attempts at adaption are presented convincingly in stories like 'Squatter', 'Swimming Lessons', and 'Lend Me Your Light'. In fact, in all these stories, we find a kind of running commentary on the nature of fiction and the relationship between the writer and his material.

I would now like to conclude that even in the first volume of stories, Rohinton Mistry has provided symptoms of a rising writer of exceptional merit, and he has avoided the divisions of linear narrative and verisimilitude and has tried instead to make full use of various post-modernistic, post-colonial devices and techniques where the mythical method, circular structure

and distortions of rules of grammar have been employed to create characters and situations which linger long in our memory like the fading fragrance of a natural flower.

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