

READING 'BIRDS OF PASSAGE' FROM ROHINTON MISTRY'S TALES FROM FIROZSHA BAAGH

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Abstract

*The dilemmas of migration, displacement and identity crisis have been dealt convincingly by Diaspora writers. One such prominent writer is Rohinton Mistry, born in Bombay, now resident of Canada, yet continually raiding the cupboards of memory for the dusty but tangible remnants of India, he has left behind. He has created a niche for himself as he focuses on the predicament of immigrants. He belongs to the Parsi Zoroastrian religious minority. He represents Young Parsi Community who has migrated to the richer countries in search of better prospects. In an interview with Ali Lakhani at the 'Vancouver International Writers Festival' Rohinton Mistry said that when Parsi race is extinct his writings will "preserve a record of how they lived to some extent". In 1987, Mistry's first volume, a collection of linked short stories, was published in the United States as *Swimming lessons and other Stories from FirozshaBaagh*, and in Canada and United Kingdom as *Tales from FirozsahBaagh*. His *Tales from FirozshaBaagh* is a collection of eleven short stories about the inhabitants of FirozshaBaagh, a Parsi monopolized apartment in Bombay. It deals with the experience of Parsis who have to face the problems of migration, displacement, and identity crisis on daily basis. The paper endeavors to highlight the constant conflict which is faced by the Parsis living there.*

Key words- *Migration, Displacement, Identity Crisis, Memories, Recognition, Immigrants.*

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-Ms. Sonal Sharma

Home is where your feet are, may your heart be there too, and I would hope that we write about the world around us and not about the world we have left behind. (1)

Many Diaspora writers face the predicament indicated in the abovementioned lines when they select clues for their stories that are waiting to be given life by the writers. Indeed every individual migrant faces an acute conflict. An unavoidable inner conflict of selecting between the native land left behind and the absolutely unknown country which has become his new home land. In spite of facing agony of migration by every individual, it is the writer who uses his literary dexterity to express the struggle in his words.

The writer narrates the inner conflict, anguish and despair so vividly and distinctly that his words become art work and the story becomes an anecdote for the reader. Rohinton Mistry is also one of such esteemed writers. Born in 1952 in the city of Bombay (now Mumbai), India, Mistry graduated in Maths and Economics from St. Xaviers College, Bombay. He grew up in a Parsi Colony of Bombay. Parsis are the religious followers of Zoroastrianism. It is said that they fled to India to avoid forced conversion to Islam. At the age of 23, Mistry shifted to Canada for better career prospects. He married Freny Elavia in the year 1975. In the beginning, Mistry worked as a clerk in the Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce in Canada. Later, he joined the University of Toronto. He got a BA degree in English and Philosophy. During his stay at Canada, Mistry began to write short stories. Soon his stories became quite popular and people admired his work. He even won two Hart House Literary prizes and Canadian fiction magazines annual contribution's prize in 1985.

Tales from FirozshaBaag is a collection of eleven decussating stories. In these stories, Mistry unfolds the composite and rich patterns of life in an apartment building 'FirozshaBaag' (Bombay). He very successfully presents the different events and each and every detail of the characters' mental conflict ; particularly conflict to find their distinctiveness in the postcolonial India, as well as immigrants' endeavor to harmonize to their absolutely new world like Canada. Almost every character, knowingly or unknowingly, expresses the inflexibility between the old and the new, between the past

and the present. The stories *Auspicious Occasion, One Sunday, The Ghost of FirozshaBaag, Condolence Visit, The Collectors, Of White Hairs and Cricket, The Paying Guest and Exercisers* focus on the encounter of a Parsi community while *Squatter, Lend Me Your Light* and *Swimming Lessons* dispense with the influence of banishment on the lives of young Parsi protagonists living abroad.

The intricate process of assimilation is the veiled theme of almost every story. It is also the keynote of the collection. The collection encircles notable topics like families, displacement, migration, (old) memories, identity crisis and recognition. Craig Tapping has rightly pointed out-

'Mistry's historical situation employs his relation to the partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947, to the consequent political histories of newly created nations and the nationalities which the writers have variously left, and to the construction once again of even newer identities in the countries to which they have immigrated'. (Craig35)(2)

The first story of the collection is *Auspicious Occasion*. Nilufer E. Bharucha's views on the story are-

'Auspicious Occasion is immediately engaged in identity construction, ethnicity, Zoroastrian religious rituals, Parsi customs, costumes and cuisine, we- consciousness among the Parsis, alienation from the majority, dominant community and downgrading of states in postcolonial India all find a place in this text' (Nilufer E.Bharucha,73-74) (3)

The main protagonists of the story are Mehroo and her husband Rustom who is twenty years old to her. The writer has depicted the characters of Rustomji and his wife Mehroo as real human beings. At the end of the story they almost become tragic characters. From a middle class conservative Parsi family, Mehroo strictly follows all the conditions and traditions related to the Parsi religion. She maintains old customs, prayers and ceremonies and also observes all the important days of Parsi calendar. The writer successfully highlights the important emblems of Parsi cultural identity. Rustomji expresses the general Parsi view about the Indians being 'uneducated, filthy, ignorant barbarians'. The feelings of Parsis about the Hindus in India are also effectively and vividly delineated. Mistry accentuates the difference between the traditional and true to heart feelings of Mehroo and her husband's cosmetic modern yet conservative attitude towards *Behramroje* celebrations. Rustomji gets into a quarrel on his way to Parsi *Agiary* when some passerby spits paan juice on his white *dugli* and the crowd, instead of commiserating with him, sneers at him, *'Bawajibawaji, duglilooks very nice now, red and*

white, just like in technicolour...' (TFB20) Finding himself outnumbered and helpless among these hooligans, Rustomji thought it is better and soothing to return to the haven of his home in the Parsi building, FirozshaBaag. Rustomji feels '*this was no country for sorrow or compassion or pity-these were worthless and at best inappropriate*' (TFB10). Later when his wife Mehroo tells him of the murder of Dustoorji in the fire temple, Rustomji is astonished and shocked. He goes apprehensive about the future of the Parsi community. He bemoans at the deplorable and collapsing values of the Parsis, '*What is happening in the world I don't know. Parsi killing Parsi...*' (TFB23) He shakes his head and stares at the gloomy and dingy condition of his flat with peeling and decaying plaster and paint. It symbolizes that the Parsi community is losing its splendid dignity, grandeur and reputation day by day. (4)

The second story of the collection is *One Sunday*, which deals with the notion of Parsi's as subalterns and in a way twice the subalterns in the Indian society. Mistry here presents a picture of various characters with an impression of Indianness in their mind set, behavior and psychology. In the story *One Sunday* Mistry has presented the true picture of the economical status of Parsis in India. Not all the Parsis have access to upper middle-class domestic conveniences like refrigerators or owning a car. Thus there seems to exist a categorical split between the privileged and the less privileged within the same community. The story *The Paying Guests* of the collection deals with the loneliness and despair of an elder couple. Ardesar and Khorshedbai are its main characters. Their only son has immigrated to Canada. The old parents are worried about the future of their son. Their all efforts are for the betterment of their son. Slowly their savings and resources exhaust in helping their son in Canada. Ultimately Ardesar and Khorshedbai had to face acute scarcity. Thus they are forced to live in destitution. They become Paying Guests in the flat of a young couple Kashmira and Boman. Our writer Mistry too left his homeland for better life. The story symbolizes the loneliness and despair of the Parsi Community.

The story *Squatter* is basically about the uncomfortable experience of immigration. The word *squatter* draws our attention to an unwelcome immigrant Sarosh-Sid in a new country. At the same time the word *Squatter* expresses how our central character can effectively empty his bowels. Mistry very successfully used the 'pun' in the story. Sarosh-Sid immigrated to Canada. But he is willing to return India after he could not become a Canadian completely. Ten years later he is fully westernized, but still he is unable to use western toilets. He still squats to ease himself. Indeed, the toilet technique of our character is quite different than that of his host country. The

writer indirectly yet effectively links it to racism. *'The world of washrooms is private and at the same time very public. The absence of feet below the stall door, the smell of faeces, the rustle of paper, glimpses caught through the narrow crack between stall door and jamb- all these added up to only one thing: a foreign presence in the stall, not doing things in the conventional way. And if one outside could receive the fetor of Sarosh's business wafting through the door, poor unhappy Sarosh could detect something malodorous in the air: the presence of xenophobia and hostility.'* (TFB 156)

The use of defecation difficulty in the story is a metaphoric concept. Our writer (Mistry) is quite proficient in using such concept. It indicates the failure of cultural assimilation. Here the body has become a site for the exploration of cultural and social issues and mental suffering. Sarosh – Sid has lost his job due to the cultural constipation. He visits and consults a number of specialists and advisers for the treatment of different digestive problems among immigrant communities. Writer here underlines the real obstacles of the new comers to the west.

Finally Sarosh- Sid succeeds in his efforts. He achieves his desired evacuation when he to leave Canada. He manages to use the toilet in the plane that is about to take off to bring him back to India. He returns to his old city Bombay, which has altogether changed now. He finds a different Bombay, quite unwanted and unfamiliar to him. Now, there is no way to recover the old life:

'The old pattern was never found by Sarosh; he searched in vain. Patterns of life are selfish and unforgiving.' (TFB 167)

The noticeable moral of the story is supposedly offered by Sarosh himself. When he rightly chooses to paraphrase Othello, another black outsider undone by an alien host culture: *'When you shall see these unlucky deeds relate, speak of me as I am; nothing extenuate, nor set down aught in malice: tell them that in Toronto once there lived a Parsee boy as best he could. Set you 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.'* (TFB 168)

Lend Me Your Light is a story of three characters having different views of life. Percy and Kersi are brothers. Jamshed is a friend of Percy. Percy thinks to do some social work in Indian villages so he wants to stay in India to achieve his goal. Jamshed sees no future in India : *'absolutely no future in this place. Bloody corruption everywhere'* (TFB 215) So he migrates to U.S. and leads a comfortable life. He is completely an anti-Indian character. Kersi is puzzled about his relationship with India. But he cannot hate India, the

way Jamshed does. At the same time, he does not want to spoil his life and career working in Indian villages like Percy. He decides to migrate to Canada. Still he feels confused. Here he is awoken by a rare incident. The night before he leaves for Canada, Kersy faces an acute eye trouble. He feels guilty of his '*sin of hubris for seeking emigration out of the land of his birth*' (TFB 217). His dilemma and mental conflict 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...*' (TFB217).

Kersy feels quite perturbed when he visits to India. He realizes that living the 'Indian life' was really a process of entering the combat zone of mental suffering. When he goes back to Toronto, he feels 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...*' (TFB233).

The last cogitative story of the collection is *Swimming Lessons* which is set in Canada. The theme of this story is quite different from the other stories. Here the agony of finding an identity in the West is linked to sexuality. He often observes attractive and good looking women from his kitchen window very lustfully. But when he invites them in the elevator and looks at their wrinkled skin, aging hands, aging bottoms, varicose veins, they do not seem attractive at all. He feels that '*the lustrous trick of the Sun and lotion has ended*'. (TFB 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 could not learn swimming in Canada and in India. It symbolizes his failure to assimilate and harmonise in India and Canada. '*The world outside the water I have seen a lot of, it is now to see what is inside.*' (TFB, 249)

The first three stories, *Auspicious Occasion*, *One Sunday* and *The Ghost of FirozshaBaag* deal with kinds of isolation from surrounding environments and are related to susceptibility and outsider status. *Condolence Visit*, *The Collectors* and *Of White Hairs and Cricket* introduce the possibility of death and attempts to come to terms with change and laws, *The Paying Guests* and *Squatter* contemplate on belonging and the spaces which the protagonists would call home but for various reasons cannot and the final stories *Lend Me Your Light*, *Exercisers* and *Swimming Lessons* interrogate the experiences of migration, exile, return and unsuccessful attempts at escape. They also revolve around individual and composite attitudes towards cultural difference and struggle. Then, three stories are framed to accommodate the narrative that oscillates between India and Canada. They produce the confrontation between Oriental and Western cultures and articulate the play

of doubleness. These moves provide thematic heterogeneity, fuse the predominant themes and merge the various stories in the collection.

As Geoffrey Kain has pointed out about *Tales from FirozshaBaag* 'The brief exposure we have to the experience of these characters, especially through the narrative voice of the sensitive and perceptive Kersi, provides us with poignant insight into the immigrant experience into what is seen as not just the impact of emigration on the émigré himself, not only the effects of departure on those who are left at a distance, but the complex and slowly changing web of consciousness that, taken together, defines the immigrant experience in Mistry's fiction'.(6)

Thus in his collection *Tales from FirozshaBagh* Rohinton Mistry has incandescently depicted the lives of Parsi community living in India and abroad. The in-between life of Parsi community is recounted in a recreative and sportive manner. He accomplishes his work in delineating the cultural quandary, the complexities of the immigrant experience, the clash of life styles and the conflicts of harmony and assimilation.

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