

## THE THEME OF EXPATRIATION AND IDENTITY CRISIS IN THE SHORT STORIES OF ROHINTON MISTRY

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### Abstract

The pain of alienation and the severe Identity Crisis one faces due to immigration to distant lands is expressed best by the writers of the Diaspora. Amongst all the writers who can be categorized as Diaspora writers, Rohinton Mistry is one writer who has created a distinct name for himself because of his brilliance as a writer and also because of his unique craftsmanship of honest portrayal of the subaltern through his short stories and novels. Mistry's own experience as an expatriate contribute extensively to the magical tales he create about the yearning and nostalgia for the past left behind in the form of the homeland, which now can only exist in memories.

Although we can trace a development in Mistry's literary journey, which takes his characters from being hopeless longers of the land left behind to strengthened people who have come to terms with this displacement, his short story collection *Tales from Firozsha Baag* (1987) is a testimony of his own struggle as an Indian Parsi expatriate in Canada from 1975 to the time the collection was written. In fact it is these stories which come closest to the genre of Expatriate Literature because of recurrent motifs of sense of alienation, despair, gloom, nostalgia, longing etc. to name a few which are a part and parcel of the quest of a new identity.

This paper is an attempt to analyze the theme of expatriation in the stories that constitute the collection *Tales from Firozsha Baag* and the search for identity in the protagonists of these stories.

*“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”<sup>(1)</sup>.*

The above lines depict the dilemma that many Diaspora writers face when choosing themes for their stories that are waiting to be given life by the writer. When a person immigrates to a new country, he faces a severe inner conflict of choosing; between the native home land which has been left behind and the foreign territory which is now home; a new homeland. Of all the people who face this conflict and struggle, a writer is the one who expresses it the most. Others feel the pain too but it is the writer who uses his literary brush and paints the picture of this struggle, gloom and despair so vividly and clearly on his canvas of papers that the words becomes images and the story becomes a movie for the reader.

One such writer who paints the picture of this struggle and pain with perfection is Rohinton Mistry who is an expatriate Indian-Parsi writer. Mistry was born in 1952 in the city of Mumbai, India. He graduated in Mathematics and Economics from St. Xavier College, Mumbai and grew up in a Parsi colony of Mumbai, known as Bombay at that time. Parsis are descendents of the religious followers of Zoroastrianism who fled to Iran to avoid forced conversion to Islam. At the age of twenty-three, Mistry shifted his base to Canada for better career prospects. In the same year i.e. 1975, he married Freney Elavia. He initially worked as a clerk in the Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce in Canada and later joined the University of Toronto and completed his B.A in English and Philosophy. After his initial stay of few years in Canada he began to write short-stories for which he earned a lot of acclaim. He even won two Hart House Literary prizes and Canadian fiction magazines annual contribution’s prize in 1985.

Mistry published his first collection of short stories titled, *Tales from Firozsha Baag*, which consists of Eleven short-stories, set within one apartment complex in modern-day Mumbai. It would not be wrong to say that Mistry’s reputation of a promising writer was established very strongly with the publication of *Tales from Firozsha Baag* which was published in 1987, in Canada. The Book was critically acclaimed and gained a lot of popularity. His first novel, *Such a Long Journey* came out in 1991 for which he received Canadians Governor General’s award, the Common Wealth Writers’ Prize for the Best-Book, and the W.H Smith-Books award. It was also shortlisted for the prestigious Booker Prize and for the Trillium award. The novel has been translated into German, Swedish, Norwegian, Danish and Japanese, and also has a movie of the same name based on it. In 1995, Mistry published his second novel, *A fine Balance*, which won him the Griller Prize, and in 1996, the Los Angeles Times Book Prize for fiction. The novel was also shortlisted for the 1996 Booker Prize. After a gap of seven years Rohinton Mistry published another novel, *Family Matters*, in 2002 which presents before the reader a befitting account of problems associated with ageing. This novel was also short-listed for the prestigious Booker-Prize. The most recent novel written by him is *Scream*, which was published in the year 2008.

Mistry’s fiction portrays diverse facets of Indian socio-economic life; as well as Parsi Zoroastrian-Life, customs, and religion. Many of his writings are markedly, “Indo-nostalgic”. Even though he settled in Canada, it is his upbringing in Mumbai that reflects in all his writings. The distinct Mumbai culture, particularly the Parsi way of life, their search for Identity, and politics of India are major themes in his novels.

As this paper attempts to primarily emphasize upon Mistry’s short stories, let us try and understand the underlying thematic currents which seem to be the common binding factor of all

stories included in *Tales from Firozsha Baag*. The short stories in the said collection mainly focus on the cultural identity and challenges of faith experienced by the residents of Firozsha Baag. The Parsi residents that reside in Firozsha Baag are separated by their religious beliefs from the greater India community. As a small religious minority, the residents of the housing complex often experience conflict with Indian society, where they are often excluded by the predominant Hindu and Muslim population. Thus in a way, Mistry's character represents the Parsi Community, whose identity has been historically problematized. *Tales from Firozsha Baag*, explores a community torn between the old-ways and the new ones. It would not be wrong to say that Alienation is one of the thematic concerns in 'Tales from Firozsha Baag'.

In *Tales from Firozsha Baag*, Mistry creates diverse characters using shades of identity crisis which is the result of expatriation on the life of young Parsi protagonists who have moved abroad. The characters in the collection present search for personal and communal identity through the recollections of a homeland and responses to the alien and new land. Mistry explores both Canadian and Indian identities in these stories and then he pictures how these identities are created and destroyed and how they coincide with each other. The process no doubt is painful and is very much similar "to dealing in broken mirrors, some of whose fragments have been irretrievably lost."<sup>(2)</sup>

As discussed earlier, Mistry immigrated to Canada in the year 1975 and *Tales from Firozsha Baag* was published in the year 1987. Thus a very strong autobiographical connection can be traced between Mistry and the characters that he has created. His protagonists, who are all Indian, and are set in the backdrop of Parsi culture; present an effective reflection of both his displacement and his search for self. Mistry localizes Firozsha Baag as a well constructed place. It is an apartment building in the middle of Bombay. He also introduces an apartment building in Toronto similar to Firozsha Baag building with its own residents. He perceives similarities in both apartment buildings and thus contributes to the creation of identity through building. In *Tales from Firozsha Baag* Mistry makes a conscious attempt to try to be exact while giving descriptions about his native land. Mistry has himself stated "I think it's something I owe to the place where I grew up. Honesty, truth and accuracy are the least I owe to that place. I don't want to forget anything about Bombay the life, the places and the people."<sup>(3)</sup> Rohinton Mistry has used a number of Parsi terms in his eleven short stories and refers profusely to Parsi customs, beliefs, superstitions and religious rituals. Uma Parameswaran points out in the book, *Literature of the Indian Diaspora in Canada*(1996) that, "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"<sup>(4)</sup>. Thus 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.

Undoubtedly Mistry emerges as a master story teller who sketches India and the Parsi culture in his short stories and novels with brilliance. He presents picture of various characters with an impression of Indianness in their mindset, behavior and psychology. The first story in the Firozsha Baag collection is *Auspicious Occasion*, which is engaged in identity construction. The protagonist lives moves around the Parsi housing complex of Khodadad building, the Zoroastrian religion, the fire-temple, the Parsi priests, the Parsi calendar, the Parsi cuisine etc. The sense of unease and loneliness that Parsis experienced in post-colonial India which led to their immigration to alien land is clearly indicated in this story. The two incidents in this story clearly

indicate the sense of insecurity felt by Parsis, one where Rustomji is spat by a pan-chewer and the second where Mehroo is shocked by the death of the Parsi priest, Dastoorji.

The second story in the collection is *One Sunday*, which deals with the notion of Parsis 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 clear divide between the privileged and the less privileged within the same community i.e. Parsi .

*The Collector* is a story of Dr.Bujer Mody's splendid stamp collection. Dr.Mody is a new tenant in Firozsha Baag. He had been transferred to Mumbai from Mysore to take up the principal ship of the Bombay veterinary college. Dr.Bujer soon becomes an integral part of the Baag. Dr. Mody's behavior is in deep contrast with goonish behavior of his son Pesi, who had been given the grand sounding name of Peshotan, drawn from the Persian epic Shah Nama. Here Dr.Modi represents those typical Indian parents who feel that they their identity as a parent has lost all significance.

*Of white hairs and cricket* is a story that weaves several sub themes into one big tale. First of all we find the theme of the Parsis as an ageing and dying race; the theme of cricket stamps for notions of honour, velour that had been inculcated into the Parsis by the Britishers during colonial period; the last theme is the immigration, mainly by the young leaving behind old parents. *Of White Hairs and Crickets* opens with young kersi resentfully pulling out the grey hair from his father's head. Kersis grand mother like most of the Parsis was firmly ill convinced that hair was evil and can be used for the purposes of black magic. This is the reason that most of the parse women cover their head with a white cloth. Thus the story clearly reflects the Indian superstitious beliefs about matters concerning hair but at the same time it also reflects typical Parsi Indian women's faith in religion, a devoted Indian women who spins wool for kustis.

The theme of loneliness and despair is presented in another of Mistry's story, *The Paying Guests*. Here the loneliness of an elder couple, Ardesar and khorshedbai is directly linked to their only son, who had immigrated to Canada. Like his characters Mistry too moved to alien land in order to be more prosperous. Their tale enables Mistry to foreground the desperate situation of old parents who are reduced to almost penury, after having saved to send their sons to the west. Thus Ardesar and Khorshedbai have had to resort to becoming paying guests in the flat of a young couple Kashmira and Boman.

In *The swimming lesson*, Kersi, the protagonist has trouble adjusting to his new life in Canada, he feels dislocated from his Indian heritage as well as from the modern Canadian culture around him. He turns to nostalgia and fantasy to alleviate the loneliness and alienation he feels. He looks at his native land with enough detachment. His quest in Canada is for an identity. He feels to be in the middle of the process of adaptation. He is in conflict in choosing his identity. The consequence is that Kersi feels that he has two identities: Indian and western. Kersi sheds his ethnic identity in Canada, but the white society is still not "home". He faces rejection in the white man's land.

As Geoffrey Kain has pointed out about *Tales from Firozsha Baag*, "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".<sup>(5)</sup> Kersi Joins a swimming class in Canada, he fails to learn swimming and blames his instructor for his own failure to adapt to Canada. He translates his difficulty in learning how to swim, into learning how to adjust to new surroundings. Kersi's life is thus characterized by silence and the absence of significant relationships. The Canada of the narrator's experience is a world where breaking relationships and disparate livelihoods co-exist. The only human bond he experiences is with a sick old man. The paralysed old man in Canada brings to his mind the image of his grandfather suffering from palsy. The entire story oscillates between personal constructs of home and away. Kersi becomes nostalgic and returns to Bombay, through his writings, where he spent his childhood. The stories show his fondness for India. Kersi thus finds parallel between people in Firozsha Baag and Don Mills (Name of the apartment building in Canada). The Portuguese women are recreation of the gossipy Najamai. Towards the end of the story, Kersi becomes more pessimistic. He suffers from deep seated guilt of the sin of hubris for seeking immigration out of the land of his birth.

Thus for Kersi, expatriation is painful, though the "Chosen land" promises prosperity and success, but his inner self remains chaotic. Kersi accomplishes what is still a cherished ideal for an expatriate "re-birth" in the chosen land which would ensure him an identity.

In 'Souatter', Mistry talks about a boy sarosh, from the Firozshabaag colony, who goes to Canada and dreams of becoming a foreign citizen in every sense. Sarosh, an Indian from the Parsi Community living in Firozshabaag is an immigrant to Canada. Sarosh calls himself 'Sid'. In ten years he becomes totally westernized in all ways except one, he is unable to solve the problem of using the Canadian toilet correctly. This story illustrates that name change signifies sarosh's desire to become a Canadian and thus to erase the trace of his own identity in India. Sarosh wants to change his toilets habits but his inability to use western toilet symbolizes his cultural dislocation and its social and psychological danger. In fact, it is not merely the western toilet but the xenophobia that makes his adjustment even more difficult in a foreign country. Thus Sarosh's attempts to give up his own identity, result in alienation and displacement. Thus Sarosh's story is the story of a man who loses his identity in new land. He realizes how different he has grown, how irreconcilable he finds life in his native land. At the same time, he feels estranged and excited in the adopted land. Thus he remains an exile both at home and abroad. Sarosh thus represents all those Indian immigrants, who desire to become completely Canadian, seem quite willing to forget their ethnic past, to efface their native roots and immerse themselves totally in western culture. Sarosh seems to be passing through a transitional phase of adjustment, which is a period of inner conflict and turmoil, through which every Diaspora passes.

The story "Lend me your Light" considers in depth the question of the ethnic identity of the immigrants and focuses on the problems encountered by the Diasporas. Jamshed in "Lend me your light" possesses very high ambitions, dreams of a bright future and material success, abhors India and decides to immigrate to America. But for Jamshed expatriation is painful. He is caught between the two worlds; the one they have forsaken and the other which promises prosperity and success. The reality is that an immigrant everywhere remains a foreigner and feels sadness in his eyes, when he looks back at the world he has left behind and despairs when he looks forward in alien and inhospitable land.

In *Such a Long Journey* (1991) Mistry writes: "Diasporic Cultural Identity is, therefore by its very nature predicated upon the inevitable mixing of castes and people. The interactions

during the lengthy sea voyages began a process that led to the remaking of cultural and ethnic identities”.<sup>(7)</sup>

As a writer of Diaspora, Rohinton Mistry always portrays the Identity quest. He has written on the identical struggle of the Parsis. The cultural baggage that the Diasporas carry is characteristic of the region that they come from. Jhumpa Lahri, another Diaspora writer, will describe the vermilion (sindoor) applied in the parting of hair in a way that no other non-Bengali writer can. The way Rohinton Mistry describes Parsi habits and customs is unique. Immigration is a recurring theme in Mistry’s fiction, from his short stories to the novel *Family Matters*, where Yezad narrates to his two sons his unsuccessful experience with bureaucracy in his young adolescent days as he attempted to go to the west. Thus expectations about the inevitability of immigration are very strong.

Nilufer Bharucha has explored the multiple aspects of Mistry’s works and she states, “Parsis in India feel insecure, experience identity crisis. The Parsi people immigrated to other countries thinking that the new country would be more favourable to them, but this sudden immigration to alien land leads to identity crisis. Neither have they had their former identity nor do they have a new one”.<sup>(7)</sup> Rohinton Mistry’s main focus is on the identity crisis faced by the Parsi people as they feel threatened in the land to which they have immigrated. Savita Goel aptly comments in *Diasporic Consciousness and Sense of Displacement in the Selected Works of Rohinton Mistry*(2001), “As a Parsi and then as a immigrant in Canada Mistry sees himself as a symbol of double displacement and this sense of double displacement is a recurrent theme in his literary works”.<sup>(8)</sup>

Thus Mistry’s short stories as well as novels articulates quest for an identity and the relationship with the homeland. Mistry’s characters are in search for individual identity against the odds of fetid poverty and pessimism. Mistry’s historical situation involves construction of new identity in the nation to which one immigrates and a complex relation with the cultural history of the nation, he has left behind.

Thus, we can say that Rohinton Mistry through his Diasporic discourse has well depicted his ancestral background, his community’s encaged situation in a metropolis like Bombay and his deep attachment with and nostalgia for a world gone by. Mistry’s meticulous description makes the readers feel as if they are walking into the streets of Bombay, visiting the houses of Parsi community and through skilful blending of the characters’ personal affairs with communal and political matters related to Bombay and India he lends them significance as social beings. Thus we can conclude that Mistry’s short stories as well as his novels are split into a complex space between two worlds and two cultures; they can neither forget the world and the culture they have come out of and which would be different if they returned to it now; nor can they fully assimilate into and be acculturated by the world and the culture they have adopted because they cannot sabotage their own identities totally, as a result they suffer from loss and nostalgia. Mistry has remained deeply rooted to his native place India. All his books especially his short stories are set in Bombay which recreates and agonizes the homesick exile. All his novels are textured skillfully with compassionate stories of native India. Tapping rightly comments that, “Mistry is engaged in identity construction through the location of the present in the past”.<sup>(9)</sup>

Thus all his works, be his short stories or novel, continue to show case Mistry’s concern with bearing witness to a dying community and humanity. Mistry has portrayed the experience of immigration and the immense pain of not being with your people with such brilliance that he has given Diaspora fiction a new level and class of its own. Mistry is such an artist with pen that

he has poured all his emotions on paper with all the reality in to it. All the characters of mistry speak about his heart. As V.S. Naipaul aptly remarks in *Finding the Centre* (1984) that “a writer after a time carries the world with him, his own burden of experience, human experience and literary experience (one deepening the other) – that I would have found equivalent connections with my past wherever I had gone”.<sup>(10)</sup>

The fiction of Mistry seems to have a nostalgic look at the country he has left behind and to the construction once again of even newer identities in the countries to which they have immigrated. For immigrants, the urge to go back to their homeland is what makes their life worth living, wherever they may go the memories of their birth place always remain alive and fresh in their minds.

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