

THE HOME AND THE WORLD: FAMILY TIES AND MIGRANT EXPERIENCE IN SELECTED TEXTS OF ROHINTON MISTRY

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Abstract

The selected fiction of Rohinton Mistry encompasses a fictional world imbued with reality: the metropolitan, middle, and lower-middle-class Parsi family. The metropolis is usually identified as Bombay/Mumbai. The characters are stuck between poverty and religion, desperate to find a way out. The selected texts deal with themes which plague the society at large: class, gender, caste and official hierarchies. His selected fiction i.e., *Tales from Firozsha Baag* and *Family Matters* traverse the expanding circles of family, neighborhood, community, and country. The family is an ambivalent space in Mistry's oeuvre. It is a circumscribed space but still acts as a comforting space. It dives deep into the cosmos of feelings, relationships, attitudes and behaviours. His oeuvre acts as a microcosm where the home and the world are juxtaposed. Mistry's own experiences as an outsider in Canada led him to compare both. He unearths a peculiarity while comparing India to a multi-cultural land like Canada, which is the base of most of his fiction. Therefore, this piece of work aims to explore the ideas of family and community, the idea of a home left behind, and how the home and the world converse in selected texts of Rohinton Mistry.

Keywords: *Family, Migrant, Multiculturalism, Immigration, and Community.*

Introduction

The selected fiction of Rohinton Mistry, i.e., *Tales from Firozsha Baag* and *Family Matters* is infused with the mystique of the imagination of exile, created in an ethos and place but forced to deal in language with the lived reality of another. Rohinton Mistry, a Canadian citizen, born in Bombay, is always searching his memory cabinets for the dingy but palpable relics of the India he left behind. Mistry finds inspiration in both vividly remembered childhood memories and the upheavals of migration (Morey 2). However, as is typically the case with stories this passionate and obviously personal, it can be challenging to distinguish between fiction and autobiography. Being an immigrant to Canada from a minority community in India, Mistry offers a distinctive viewpoint on the various concessions necessary for the creation of identities.

Indeed, a major issue in his selected writings is identity, which is viewed from both a personal and a national perspective. The selected works offers a sardonic, occasionally melancholy viewpoint on India, a postcolonial country: a so-called perspective from the periphery. It also reflects the rich heritage he is a part of, his identity as a postcolonial subject and as a component of a religious minority and an ethnic group that according to history supported the British and adopted their ways and values. His fiction draws inspiration from the crucial

works of Indian Literature in English, great works of nineteenth and twentieth-century European Literature, and the Persian epic storytelling tradition.

Additionally, his identity as 'the national' may be questioned on various levels in Mistry's life and writing. He equals Salman Rushdie and Bharati Mukherjee as a chronicler of migrancy because of his self-developed 'Canadianness' and the context in which a few of his last stories from *Tales from Firozsha Baag* are set (Morey 5).

Therefore, the paper endeavours to explore the ideas of family and community, home and abroad and reconciliation and alienation as explored by Mistry in the selected texts i.e., *Tales from Firozsha Baag* and *Family Matters*. To explore the ways in which familial bondage can become a site of both chaos and comfort. Also, comprehend how the diasporic identity becomes the locus of cultural and social conflict and how one never really feels 'at home.'

Literature Review

Saquist, Mohd, and Manoj Kumar. (2020) "Representation of Parsi Community in Rohinton Mistry's Fiction" explores the minority caste system, politics, particularly Zoroastrianism, the Parsi community and its historical background in Mistry's fiction.

Ta, Raju. (2019) "Probing into the Idea of Nation: A Study of Rohinton Mistry's *Such a Long Journey* and *Family Matters*" focusses on how Mistry fictionalises the history of the nation, in which the lives of common people serve as a background.

Shahid Abdullah, Md Abu. (2019) "Construction of Home, Nation and Identity in Rohinton Mistry's *Tales from Firozsha Baag*." This paper explores the ideas of home, nation and nationhood. How Mistry, through his characters, explores his own psyche about the alienation of immigrant experience.

Neelakandan, S. and M, Karunakaran. (2018) "Diasporic Consciousness in Rohinton Mistry's Family Matters: A Study," the paper deals with the portrayal and treatment of diasporic identity in Mistry's fiction.

Shanmuga Priya, C. (2017) "Immigration with Parsis in Rohinton Mistry's *Swimming Lessons and Other Stories from Firozsha Baag*" explores how in his collection of short stories, *Swimming Lessons and Other Stories from Firozsha Baag*, Mistry explores the social exploitation of migrants by native people both inside and outside of India. The ways in which his fiction portrays the social, cultural, and political life in India.

Kamlani, Beena. (2013) in "Lend Me Your Light: Rohinton Mistry and the Art of Storytelling," claims that prior to reading Rohinton Mistry, she had never encountered such individuals in literature. 'How was it possible that a world I had considered lost was once more available for me to enjoy, remember, and treasure?'

Kumar, Rajesh. (2012), in his study "Treatment of Parsi Culture and Traditions in the Works of Rohinton Mistry," carefully examined the element of culture and tradition in the broader sense of diasporic consciousness and reconstructed the history of the Parsi community as well as the history of the country. The thesis explores a wide range of customs, rituals, food, ethnic relations, religious customs, myth, displacement, dislocation, relocation, expatriation, assimilation, and cultural hybridity in addition to the refined activities of everyday life of ordinary Parsi people. An in-depth analysis of Mistry's literature demonstrates how the conflict between saying goodbye and saying hello (to Canada) has given rise to a double-diasporic awareness from the shards of the past and the present combined.

Tamilselvi, B. (2012) in the work, "Diasporic Elements in Rohinton Mistry's *Tales from Firozsha Baag*"

covered a complex relationship between Rohinton Mistry's historical circumstances and the history imbued with the culture of the country he relinquished. How his fiction entails the formation of a new identity in the country to which he has gone. He dramatises the feelings of alienation, but eventually, they result in adaptation, which benefits the Parsis both at home and abroad.

Basantari, Vinita Dilip. (2012) "Rohinton Mistry's *Tales from Firozsha Baag* – An Expression of Parsi Ethos," asserts that a thorough analysis of Mistry's writings foreground the fact that like other writers from underrepresented groups, he too gives a unique portrait of his society.

Kumari, Meenakshi. (2011) examined "Humanism" in Mistry's literary works. Humanism underpins Mistry's novels. He's a true humanist because he values science and people. She also looked at the barriers social and political power systems posed to humanism; a topic Mistry covers extensively in his books. Mistry's compassion is shown in how he respects lower-class people.

Roy, G. A. and Pillai, Meena. (2007) "*Rohinton Mistry: An Anthology of Recent Criticism*," is an anthology of the recent criticism on Rohinton Mistry's works. The book includes a number of essays on various themes in Mistry's fiction.

Malieckal, Bindu. (2006) "Parsis, Emigration, and Immigration in Rohinton Mistry's *Swimming Lessons and Other Stories from Firozsha Baag*" explores the immigrant experience in Mistry's short story collection.

Morey, Peter. (2004) *Rohinton Mistry: Contemporary World Writers* deals with a thematic exploration of Rohinton Mistry's fiction.

Dodiya, Jaydipsinh. (2004) *The Novels of Rohinton Mistry: Critical Studies* includes a series of critical essays on the fiction of Rohinton Mistry.

Eustace, John. (2003) "Deregulating the Evaluated Body: Rohinton Mistry's Studies in Canadian Literature," in the following essay, Eustace focuses on how much faeces is represented in Mistry's oeuvre, specifically in the short story titled "Squatter."

Davis, Rocío G. (2001) "Negotiating Place/Re-Creating Home: Short-Story Cycles by Naipaul, Mistry, and Vassanji," this chapter deals with the treatment of memory in order to recreate a home in the fiction of writers: V.S Naipaul, Rohinton Mistry and M.G. Vassanji.

Verma, K. D. (2000) *The Indian Imagination: Critical Essays on Indian writing in English*, A pattern of awareness is revealed by the interdisciplinary humanities research on the Indian Imagination. This book, which is essentially a piece of 20th-century literature, concentrates on riots in Indian history.

Ross, Robert L. (1999) "Seeking and Maintaining Balance: Rohinton Mistry's Fiction," Ross provides an outline of Mistry's career, discusses the reasons for his critical success, and argues that the greatest part about his work is how well the various elements are balanced.

Gabriel, Sharmani Patricia. (1999), in her thesis titled "Constructions of Home and Nation in the Literature of the Indian diaspora, with Particular Reference to Selected Works of Bharati Mukherjee, Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh and Rohinton Mistry," analyses Mistry's fiction through the lens of diaspora narratives. This thesis makes an effort to examine what it means to be at home and belong and the ideas of nation and individuality parallel to them.

Bharucha, Nilufer E. (1996) "From Behind a Fine Veil: A Feminist Reading of Three Parsi Novels," Bharucha deals with the representation and treatment of women in Mistry's fiction.

Immigrant Experience and Familial Bondage in Mistry's *Tales from Firozsha Baag*

Swimming Lessons and Other Tales from Firozsha Baag, the first volume of short stories by Rohinton Mistry, was released in 1987 in the United States; *Tales from Firozsha Baag* was released in the United Kingdom and Canada and in addition to containing the two stories which won the Hart-House Prize, "Auspicious Occasion" and "One Sunday," it also introduced themes, symbols, and literary devices that would subsequently appear in his later works. The employment of analogous characters, the elusiveness of language and the restorative authority of the stories narrated are discussed. Relationships between people, fruitless attempts at communication, families and their intricate internal politics, captivity and the longing to break free from, the body, its functions, memory and the pull of the past and final dissolution, are all portrayed.

Tales from Firozsha Baag is a short story collection that depicts a series of episodes that occur over several years in the 1960s as the main character Kersi Boyce matures from youth to adulthood. Kersi Boyce also serves as the writer-narrator who compiles the stories and essentially "writes" the book the reader is reading. As a result, the tales portray the sometimes-unpleasant path from innocence to experience and youth to adulthood. The volume can be divided into the following convenient units: the initial three stories, "Auspicious Occasion," "One Sunday," and "The Ghost of Firozsha Baag," each deal with different forms of alienation from the encompassing environment and are concerned with susceptibility and foreign status; "The Collectors," "Of White Hairs and Cricket," and "Condolence Visit" introduce the fact that death is inescapable and discuss ways to deal with loss and transition; The final triplet, composed of "Lend Me Your Light," "Exercisers," and "Swimming Lessons," explores the experiences of expatriation, migration, ineffective efforts at emigration and return. "The Paying Guests" and "Squatter" emphasise on connection and the places that the characters would consider home but are unable to do so for a variety of reasons.

Outcasts: 'One Sunday,' 'Auspicious Occasion,' and 'The Ghost of Firozsha Baag'

One is introduced to Firozsha Baag's deteriorating environment and one of its most obnoxious residents in "Auspicious Occasion." Nariman Hansotia, a local wag, dubbed Rustomji "the curmudgeon." Rustomji and his wife Mehroo get ready for the *Behram roje* celebrations, introducing one to the Parsi community in Bombay. He displays indifference to the traditions that his wife values while secretly enjoying the aspect of performance that festivals like *Behram roje* bring, even though he is dressed in the ceremonial Parsi attire that distinguish him from India, which is primarily Hindu.

The story begins when the pair heads to the fire temple. His lack of interest in the rituals and superstitions surrounding this unanticipated event arises from his wish for things to go well and avoid unpleasant incidents, highlighting the basic quandary faced by Parsis in the nation: how to blend tradition with the need to keep up with modernity. The narrative reveals that Rustomji's grumbling about the fact that two of Britain's finest heirlooms, Lifebuoy Soap and Johnnie Walker Scotch, are now only accessible on the black market is representative of the desire to look back, which is usually associated with anglophilia in Parsis, and which the story uses to represent the location of Parsi identity in postcolonial India. Rustomji's yet conflicted reaction to the Indian worker who arrives to clean their apartment symbolises the Parsi sense of superiority over other Indians. He refers to Gajra as a "gunga," a derogatory term that some Parsis use to refer to their non-Parsi slaves. He does this in anticipation of later calling the mob that is around him "ghatis."

By describing the interdependence of Najamai and her neighbours, Mistry establishes the interconnection of Baag existence. She lets the Boyces, who live on the floor below, and Tehmina, who lives next door, use her refrigerator to store their supplies in exchange for them bringing her morning delivery of groceries and lending

her their newspaper. However, just like in "Auspicious Occasion," an unforeseen act of terror tears through the daily marks of routine. When Najamai returns, Francis is surprised by her suspicious behaviour. He rushes towards the nearby streets as soon as she shouts in shock. Later on, when Kersi and some other people look for Francis with their bats, Najamai reflects, 'How absurd they appeared. Pursuing poor Francis with their powerful bats! As if he had ever intended to harm them' (Mistry 38).

The episode, especially its unpleasant climax, shows how insecure minorities may target another minority. When the chase subsides, Kersi feels awful for pursuing the defenceless Francis. He shatters his cricket bat fiercely in his room, disgusted with himself. His values of fair play, that are ingrained in the game of cricket, along with the bat, destroy his notion of heroism.

'One Sunday' is a type of looking glass narrative to 'Auspicious Occasion,' with the insider and outsider roles switched. It is still a story about the frailer outcast being victimised, but in this instance, by a group of people that one might assume would know better.

The Goanese ayah of a prosperous Parsi couple narrates the story, 'The Ghost of Firozsha Baag.' She watches ayahs grind masala and chop vegetables on the floor. Jaakaylee sleeps outside the flat, beside the stairs, after midnight mass to avoid disturbing her employers. Here, she first witnesses Firozsha Baag's ghost.

At first, the Baag locals dismiss Jaakaylee's ghost claims as the ramblings of an elderly woman from a backwater region of the country. When Jaakaylee returns from midnight mass, the ghost appears. Easter brings the next ghostly visit. The bold apparition appears in Jaakaylee's bed, 'bouncing on my chest' (Mistry 46). Such events may indicate repression. While there is no counternarrative to cast doubt on Jaakaylee's account, the ghost's activities are reminiscent of Henry James' novella *The Turn of the Screw*, where the hauntings witnessed by an inexperienced and hysterical young governess seem just as likely to be the result of psychosis as posthumous theatrics. Through her skill as a yarn spinner, Jaakaylee is taken 'inside' and becomes an 'honorary Parsi.' The haunted ayah of Firozsha Baag is the earliest indication of Mistry's confidence in storytelling's redemptive and communicative potential.

Displacement and Departure: 'Exercisers,' 'Swimming Lessons,' and 'Lend Me Your Light'

With its themes of escapist attempts to escape reality and the enduring power of ties to the past, the portrayal of the cognitive and physiological effects of migration in the short story 'Squatter' serves as a crucial precursor to the final triplet of stories despite its light-heartedness. In a way, the first of these, "Lend Me Your Light," provides a "real-life" parallel for Sarosh-Sid's allegorical experiences. Themes of past and present connection and detachment, as well as past and present identities, narrative, and many journey forms, are once more explored. The first-person narrator Kersi retracts the reader through the incidents of his teenage years and immigration to Canada in a more sophisticated narrative voice. As the narrator, Kersi shares Nariman's love of language and awareness of its influence; he reflects in sorrow at his conceited use of the term "ghati" for Indian servants in his youth and the hubris it conveyed. Jamshed, a friend of Kersi's brother Percy who takes advantage of this superiority complex, wins Kersi's initial admiration. The Jamshed family's residence is an opulent elevator-equipped tenth-floor apartment complex. He receives his lunch from a "chauffeur-driven," "air-conditioned," and "leather-upholstered" vehicle and he consumes it in what Kersi refers to as "this collection of hyphenated lavishness (Mistry 174). Kersi, too, could be considered one of those "hyphenated subjectivities" of the new "border" Indian migrants as defined by Vijay Mishra, who stays connected to the home nation via their ties to the family and make sporadic homecoming visits (Mishra). Though, as a young

Parsi drawn to the West by its allure and ordained to immigrate a year post his affluent neighbour. Jamshed is eager to leave India since he considers it a hopeless cause because of its filth, poverty, and corruption. Jamshed writes Kersi a letter later after they are both settled in North America, detailing the uncomfortable realities of the latest sojourn he made to Bombay, which lasted two weeks. Kersi, who has a troubling connection with his own nation, struggles to understand Jamshed's fury and wonders whether he is acting out to hide something. He realises he is in a way, responding by displaying his "Indianness." Although he has only gone to Toronto's "Little India" once, he pretends to visit there often in his response and indicative of his membership of the Zoroastrian Society of Ontario and describes how during the celebrations of the Parsi New Year, a certain class of expatriates' trade tales about Indian inefficiency:

As the evening progressed, it took on, at an alarming rate, the semblance of a wedding party at Bombay's Cama Garden ... [but] It was Cama Garden refurbished and modernised, Cama Garden without the cluster of beggars waiting by the entrance gate for the feast to end so they could come in and claim the dustbins. (Mistry 182) With "a supply of 'ohs' and 'aahs' for ejaculation at proper moments, pretending to discover what they had always lived with," they disparage these sterile replicas of India they have abandoned (Mistry 182). These exiles contribute. It is considered that the opinions they adopt about the home nation are an inescapable aspect of the psychology of migration.

This retrospective story's self-consciousness is highlighted by its dismissal of the quasi-resolutions of modernist storytelling. In the end, Kersi faces his unanswered questions and realises the old narrative consolation is also fictitious: "The revelation would have to wait till another occasion or journey" (Mistry 192). This issue of vision and revelation alludes to T.S. Eliot's modernist fragmentation poem, *The Waste Land*. Kersi returns and observes from the plane the "parched country" of India. As he walks dejectedly through his old haunts, he is captivated by "the masses that were now flooding down Flora Fountain" (Mistry 189). He recalls the mass in Eliot's 'Burial of the Dead' over the London Bridge, undone by the metaphorical death.

Family Matters, Rohinton Mistry's third book, is set against the backdrop of communal politics and social injustice and corruption. Mistry provides a panorama of the contemporary Indian milieu: from the suffering of Parsis in India as a marginalised community to the more general worries of exploitation and communalist outrages through the personal problems of one middle-class Parsi family. The pervasive nature of corruption in India serves as the inspiration for this story's central thesis statement: "Corruption is in the air we breathe" (Mistry 30).

The novel, like its predecessors, explores the ways, irrespective of the efforts to keep them apart, the public realm invades the domestic sphere and the ways corruption may poison even the most isolated and ostensibly moral of societies. The premise of the novel is apparently about the struggles an impoverished Parsi family goes through as they strive to take care of their old and ailing patriarch. The interactions between characters and the larger environment they live in include a complicated web of actions and reactions. The social and political corruption that characterises contemporary Bombay is related to physical corruption and the unavoidable change and loss that come with death, coupled with the moral decay of those who, frequently for admirable causes, commit lies and surrender to dishonesty. For instance, Yezad Chenoy gambles on the illegal lottery, the *Matka*, using his family's valuable housekeeping funds, causing losses they cannot afford. However, he does so in the hopes of covering the additional costs brought on by the appearance of his Parkinson's disease-afflicted father-in-law. The latter was ejected from his home by the crafty ruses of an irate

stepdaughter at her wit's end. In a same vein, Jehangir, his son, is under pressure to renege on his duty as assignment supervisor at school and accept payment for covering up his classmates' errors in a move related to the pervasive local and countrywide exploitation that shows legislators and convicts working together. Yezad's efforts, in particular, to convince his ecumenical proprietor to run for politics on an anti-communist and anti-corruption platform end tragically. It is not his intention to save Bombay but a promotion he intends to gain, as a result, is what motivates him.

The questions of cause and consequence are raised in *Family Matters*. Kersi wonders if the 'radiators are heated by the hot water that flows through them when the building's heating system malfunctions. Or is the situation reversed? Is the lack of hot water a result of the radiators ceasing to circulate it' (Mistry 244)? It is also highlighted that the Parsi community has a high divorce rate. Kersi comments on how westernised it is and speculates as to whether the high divorce rate is due to the westernisation of the community or the other way around.

Family is significant as the source of first allegiances, or "filiation," in Edward Said's words, as well as the location of complex and frequently unsolved concerns. Family eventually has both positive and negative implications in the novel. Mistry's longing for homecoming and reintegrating into his community serves as the novel's central theme. Mistry, who immigrated to Canada, captures Yezad's aspiration to immigrate there in exquisite detail. As a result, Mistry's portrayal of Yezad includes autobiographical elements. In the narrative, it is pretty obvious how much he and Yezad resemble one another. Mistry also makes reference to the pervasive corruption in India through his persona. He says, "corruption is in the air we breathe. This nation specialises in turning honest people into crooks" (Mistry 30).

Conclusion

Rohinton Mistry's selected fiction has a subtle, straightforward style with metaphorical depth. He uses this appealing but dynamic combination of simplicity and intellect to analyse individuals facing social and political conditions that create considerable strain and need them to address disputes about politics, principles and personal accountability. The paper has argued how *Tales from Firozsha Baag* contains questions of migration, belonging and individual identity and the narrative simultaneously challenges the borders of its genre replicating and rejecting the clichés of literary comfort and testing the bounds of its own genre. The novel, *Family Matters*, brings questions of corruption and integrity to the surface. In this context, ideas of familial loyalty, personal retribution, and religious faith are positioned next to one another with ideas of the many and sometimes contradictory demands of duty. The author values family but recognises that it can take numerous forms and that biological ties can be both onerous and compassionate.

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