

## **Identity Crisis in Rohinton Mistry's *Tales from Firozsha Baag***

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### **Abstract**

This paper analyses what happens to one's identity when one is suspended between two different cultures. Rohinton Mistry being a diasporic writer, authentically portrays this theme in *Tales from Firozsha Baag*. The three stories discussed in this paper 'Squatter', 'Lend me Your Light' and 'Swimming Lessons' reflect identity Crisis faced by different characters of Parsi community who feel dislocated in India as well as in Canada.

**Key Words:** Identity, Culture, Diaspora, Displacement, Adaptability

Rohinton Mistry is known as another 'writer from elsewhere' as Rushdie describes. He was born in Bombay in 1952, of Parsi origin. Mistry emigrated to Canada in 1975. On leaving Bombay, the city which stands so tall in all his writings, Mistry confesses in the literary journal *Rung* (1993) that his departure from India was partly encouraged by the expectations of his peers, especially those of his generation.

In 1987 Penguin Books Canada published his collection of short stories *Tales from Firozsha Baag* which together describe the daily life of the Parsi residents in a Bombay apartment block. The stories concern themselves with the tribulations and the idiosyncrasies of Parsis in Bombay.

Rohinton Mistry's *Tales from Firozsha Baag* is a book of eleven interrelated short stories. In these stories Mistry explores the relationships at the heart of the Parsi community, their cultural identity and the uniqueness of their community living. At the same time Mistry seeks to shed light and indeed fully embrace the syncretic nature of the diasporic Parsi experience, whether that be in North America or in India. Some of the stories focus on the journeys undertaken by some of Firozsha Baag's Parsis, some who dared to leave for North America, leaving behind their 'imaginary homeland'. The story 'Lend Me Your Light' contains explicit reference to this guilt and here the protagonist says with the poignancy of a modern day Tiresias, "I am guilty of hubris for having sought to emigrate from the land of my birth, and I must pay with the price of my burnt eyes: Me Tiresias, blind and shaking between two lives, that of Bombay and the one to come in Toronto" (217).

Rohinton Mistry is a writer who makes up a part of the Indian diaspora. Moreover he is also a Zoroastrian Parsi whose ancestors were exiled by the Islamic conquest of Iran, putting him and his kind in diaspora in the Indian subcontinent. During India's colonized period, the Parsis were particular favourites of the British rulers. Both parties co-operated well together and this entente has often been dubbed 'the psychological diaspora' of the Parsis. After the partition of India in 1947, some Parsis found themselves toeing 'the line of discontent' between two warring regions. This situation provoked

many departures to England and to America, marking the western diaspora of the Parsis.

Like other Parsi writers, Mistry's work is guided by this experience of double displacement. As a Parsi, Mistry finds himself at the margins of Indian society, and hence his writing challenges and resists absorption by the dominating and Hindu-glorifying culture of India.

Mistry's intention in writing *Tales from Firozsha Baag* is mainly to write about the lives of the Parsis in 'the old world' which wants to preserve. His main focus is on the identity crisis faced by the Parsis who feel threatened in the land to which they have emigrated. In an interview to Canadian Fictional Magazine, Mistry said

...an identity that is, in many ways, strikingly different from that of my parents I have from a very young age, thought of myself first as a human and then any nationality that may have been relevant at the time. However, in recent times, I have come to question that somewhat glib, idealistic view of my own identity That I am a Canadian and originally from India has a role to play in who I am and in the formation of my personal opinions, values and morals: that much, I must acknowledge.

'Squatter' is an immensely engaging story in which the issues related to immigration are presented in a very humorous but matter-of-fact manner. In this story 'Squatter' Sarosh emigrates to Canada hoping that he will lead a prosperous and luxurious life there. In order to identify himself completely with Canadian and to erase his identity as Indian he changes his name to Sid. Before Sarosh's departure to Canada his mother advises him "Its better to live in want among your family and your friends, who love you and care for you, than to be unhappy surrounded by vacuum cleaners and

dishwashers and big shiny motor cars” (187). So he promises his mother that he would completely assimilate with Canadian culture, if otherwise he would return to Bombay.

He successfully goes through everything but encounters a problem of squatting. He depends on the old way of squatting in order to relieve him. He feels miserable and uncomfortable to perch on the top of the toilet and plant his feet firmly for balance upon the white plastic oval of the toilet sheet. Sarosh had suffered this for past ten years. This brings the cultural clash due to displacement. Though he wants to assimilate with the new country, he finds it irrelevant to assimilate in the multi culturalistic Canada. Nariman, the narrator of the story ‘Squatter’ remarks Sarosh’s failure in Canada as “If he could not be westernized in all respects, he was nothing but the failure in this land - a failure not just in the wash rooms of nation but everywhere.”(202)

As he feels alienated in Canada he immigrates again to Bombay hoping to have an identity in India. Sarosh who calls Sid in Canada, wants to be called Sarosh again in India. In his conversation with Nariman, Sarosh says, “No! No! No more Sid, please, that name reminds me of all my troubles” (203). But Nariman, the narrator points that his return is impossible. Likewise Sarosh finds that everything has changed in the course of ten years. Hence he cannot identify himself in India also. “The old pattern was never found by Sarosh; he searched in vain. Pattern of life is selfish and unforgiving” (203). Thus he does not gain any identity and feels alienated in both India and Canada. C.P.Ravichandran says:

Like Shakespeare’s Othello, Sarosh is able to position himself in relation to a new environment while Othello cannot internalize the values of

Venice, Sarosh fails to cope with what he assumes to be the cultural conventions of the Canadian Diaspora. By alluding to the requirements of classical tragedy, that is, the tragic flaw and dilemma, Mistry unconditionally also suggests that Sarosh is to blame for his failure to make it in Canada as well as in India. (Grace 55)

‘Lend Me Your Light’ details a broader variety of identities and attitudes of those wanting to immigrate. In this story, the protagonist emigrates to Canada while his brother’s friend Jamshed goes to United States. Jamshed feels happy to live a luxurious and sophisticated life in North America. Jamshed blames India and hates the crowded throbbing life in India. According to him the politicians will not allow the honest and intelligent people to grow. “Nothing ever improves just too much corruption. It’s all part of the ghati mentality because no ghaties live there, so North America is less corrupt and more sophisticated than India”(219). Jamshed and Sarosh believe that being an American or a Canadian is better than being an Indian. They see hopelessness in India, while they see financial opportunity and cultural superiority in the West. Thus Mistry shows how Jamshed and Sarosh as emigrants to India cannot tolerate the cultures and practices in India and so with out identity in India they move to a highly sophisticated country.

Kersi on the contrary is in conflict in choosing his identity . He feels as if he has two identities; Indian and western .During his departure to Toronto he compares himself to T.S. Eliot’s blind seer Tiresias, he says “I Tiresias. blind and throbbing between two lives, the one in Bombay ,and the one in two come in Toronto.”(233). This aforesaid line reveals his inner conflict, his failure to adapt to the new identity. Kersi, even after moving

to Toronto remains unique as Parsi and searches for his own community there and develops friendship with them. Though he doesn't long deeply to come back to India. When Jamshed says badly about India that "Bombay is horrible seems dirtier than ever, and the whole trip just made me sick" Kersi says "it irritated me"(230).

In 'the swimming lessons' the protagonist Kersi has trouble in adjusting to his new life Canada ,Thus he feels alienated. He feels dislocated from his Indian heritage as well as from the modern Canadian culture. Thus he turns to nostalgia, to assuage the loneliness and alienation he feels. He foregrounds the conventional image of the eastern man in the eyes of the West. The West always treats the East as the other in the emigrated land. Kersi has been made fun of by three young man while learning to swim. "As I enter the showers three young boys, probably from a previous class, emerge. One of them holds his nose. The second begins to hum under his breath: Paki Paki smell like curry. The third says to the first two: pretty soon all the waters going to taste of curry" (286). This makes kersi to think that he is not accepted and cannot be accepted in Canada .Thus he suspects the instructor to be partial towards the East though the instructor doesn't have any feeling of discrimination in his mind.

This instructor is an irresponsible person. Or he doesn't value the lives of non white immigrants. I remember the three teenagers. May be the swimming pool is is the hangout of some racist group, bent on eliminating all non-white swimmers to keep their pure and their white sisters unogled.  
(288)

Thus the Aforesaid examples portray the diasporic characteristics, they are not and cannot be accepted by the host land.

‘Swimming Lessons’ also identifies similarities between the narrator of the story and the writer Rohinton Mistry. In the short story, Kersi’s father and mother reads the stories written by him and understands his fondness for India and portrays how he is alienated from his cultural roots. Though he feels alienated in Canada he doesn’t return to India because he doesn’t have the root and belongingness to India also. But he remembers with nostalgia the place of his birth.

On reading this story the similarities between Mistry and Kersi is projected. The discussions between the mother and the father about their son’s stories are like the argument between Mistry and the audience. In this story he reveals the reason for his choice of Bombay as his favourite place and the reason for his preference in writing about middle class Parsi life. Mistry, who emigrated to Canada in his youth, recollects his love for Bombay in all his fiction.

Most Parsi writers who have emigrated to other countries have identity crisis as a principle theme, there is a sense of loss and a feeling of nostalgia in them. Mistry’s emigrant experiences make him think of his own native land from different angles. As a creative writer his experiences enable him to compare India and Canada. He emigrated to Canada in order to earn wealth and become prosperous. But he sensed a bitter conflict due to the alienation he felt in the new land and his attachment to his homeland. It is this sense of alienation and nostalgia that finds expressions through his stories. Thus it is rich in diasporic perspective.

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