

## **Cultural Identity of the Parsi Community in Rohinton Mistry's *Tales from Firozsha Baag***

**Dr. Prabhat Kumar**  
Assistant Professor  
Department of English  
A. S. College, Bikramganj, V.K.S.U. Ara

### **Abstract**

The present abstract proposes to examine the issue of cultural identity of the Parsi community living in India in the light of Rohinton Mistry's "Tales from Firozsha Baag", (*TFB*) a collection of short stories. Mistry's writing voices for the devoiced. The issue of the Parsi cultural identity and its challenges is a recurring theme in almost all his novels. The present abstract highlights the queer and segregated life-style of the Parsi community living in Bombay in India. Firozsha Baag, for Mistry, is an imaginative enclave in Bombay where the majority Parsi community lives. Mistry, through *TFB*, unfolds the angst, plight, intricacy, discrimination and fear of being left out from the mainstream of society among various Parsi characters living in India. The Parsis, living in Bombay, are under the perpetual fear whether they can co-exist peacefully with the majority Hindu community or not. Such fear forms the main premise of this abstract, and Mistry, through the story of "Auspicious Occasion", pinpoints the issue of Parsi survival against the communal and radical forces growing fast in a nation like India.

**Keywords:** the Parsi Cultural Identity, Self and Other, Fundamentalism

## **Introduction**

The issue of Parsi cultural identity crisis is a recurring theme in almost all the works of Rohinton Mistry. The term cultural identity crisis, in the broadest sense, refers to a group of people who are at the 'periphery' against the 'centre'. The early-mid works of Rohinton Mistry address the issue of predicament, idiosyncrasy, discrimination and marginalisation of the dispossessed such as the Parsi community and lower-middle class in India. According to the latest Census figure, the Parsi community is the fastest depleting community in India. This fear of being left out from the mainstream of civilization is poignantly reflected in Rohinton Mistry's collection of short story "Tales from Firozsha Baag", (*TFB*) where all the Parsi characters keep searching for a new identity for survival, whether through emigration or reinventing through religious enlightenment.

## **Decaying values in the Parsi Community**

The short stories contained in *TFB* are a realistic representation of the angst, fear and sense of being marginalised of the micro Parsi community living as 'others' in India. Firozsha Baag, situated at the city Bombay, metaphorically represents 'periphery' which is mostly inhabited by the Parsi community in a country which is 'centre' for the people belonging to Hinduism. Mistry, through *TFB*, reflects the inner and outer conflict of the Parsi community who is torn between the 'self' and the 'others'. In fact, the reason of the identity crisis for the Parsi community can better be understood from the various characters of the *TFB* of how they are dwindling between old Zoroastrian faith and a material wish for embracing modernity. Mistry has observed this dilemma in the Parsi community, and therefore their old beliefs and customs have undergone introspection through the various characters in the story.

“Auspicious Occasion (AC)”, a tale from Firozsha Baag, gives us a faint hope for the survival of decaying Zoroastrianism. The title “Auspicious Occasion” refers to *Behram roje*, the Parsi New Year which symbolises cultural fragrance and piety. The story is a representation of an effort of a young Parsi religious lady Mehroo, who is married to a middle aged advocate Rustomji. Mehroo, in the story, is trying her best to preserve the ideals of Parsi religion by observing the rituals on this auspicious occasion. For Mehroo *Behram roje* is an auspicious day as:

.....on *Behram roje* her mother had given birth to her at the Awabai Petit Parsi Lying-In Hospital; it was also the day her *navjote* had been performed at the age of seven, when she was confirmed a Zoroastrian by the family priest, Dustoor Dhunjisha; and finally, Rustomji had married her on *Behram roje*,.... . (Mistry, AC 4)

Such religious emotions reflect that how innocently and strictly Mehroo observes the rituals of Zoroastrianism. She goes to the family fire temple to observe the prayers on this auspicious day. She rests her hopes in her family priest Dustoor Dhunjisha who, according to her belief, has a magic touch to console and give her divine comfort like a father – figure.

On the other hand, her husband Rustomji has a modern and sceptic towards religion. He is a combo of orthodoxy as well as modernity. He is a modern Parsi in the sense for he allows his wife Mehroo to roam free in the house during her unclean days. But he also, like a conventional Parsi, observes the rituals and customs of his own religion with a sense of indifference:

In fact, Rustomji secretly enjoyed most of the age – old traditions while pretending indifference. He loved going to the fire-temple dressed up in his sparkling white

*dugli*, starched white trousers, the carefully brushed *pheytoe* on his head..... . (Mistry, AC 4)

However, the auspicious day turns into inauspicious when all the efforts of Mehroo are shattered into vain due to the chain of unprecedented events follow in the story. The leaking toilet forecasts the omen for the next course of ill incident in the story. Rustomji is annoyed for he could not ease himself because of the leaking lavatory. Though, Mehroo tries her best to make everything perfect on this day and hence she phones the Baag trustee to get the WC repaired. The sense of religious brotherhood is reflected in the words of Mehroo when she says, “Bawa, you are a Parsi too, you know how very important *Behram roje* is” (Mistry, AC 13).

The story turns into a tragedy when Mehroo discovers that her family Priest Dustoor Dhunjisha has been murdered by an employee at Fire Temple. The killing of the Parsi priest is a killing of the whole humanity. This is the end of the world for an innocent lady like Mehroo. She cannot understand the moral disorder of the universe and Rustomji expresses her feelings in these words, “What is happening in the world I don’t know. Parsi killing Parsi.....chasniwalla and dustoor....” (Mistry, AC 23).

The Parsi is one of the most innocent and peace-loving religious communities. The killings among this pious community imply the end of human faith and love on earth. This moral disorder has already been anticipated in W.B. Yeats’s *The Second Coming*, “Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold; / Merely Anarchy is loosed upon the world,” (Yeats, *The Second Coming* 424).

On the other hand, Rustomji plays a double-fold role of tragic-comic character. He is, unlike other conventional Parsis, has a modern approach towards religion. He allows his wife

Mehroo to follow all the rituals and customs of Zoroastrianism except staying in a separate room during unclean days. He also pretends to be indifferent to religion whereas he secretly enjoyed the old age customs:

In fact, Rustomji secretly enjoyed most of the age-old traditions while pretending indifference. He loved going to the fire-temple dressed up in his sparkling white *dugli*, starched white trousers, the carefully brushed *pheytoe* on his head..... (Mistry, AC 4)

Rohinton Mistry also addresses the issue of sex crime through the perverted mindset of Rustomji. In the story, Rustomji has a dying wish to have a view of his maid Gajra's breast:

Rustomji's one fervent wish was that some day Gajra's breasts should slip out far enough from under her choli to reveal her nipples. 'Dada Ormuzd, just once let me see them, only once,' he would yearn in his depths, trying to picture the nipples: now dark brown and the size of a gram but with the hidden power to swell; now uncontrollably aroused and black, large and pointed. ( Mistry, AC 11)

Such voluptuous longing of a fifty-year old man, who already possesses a young wife, reflects a bleak reality of a sexually diseased society. The brutal gang-rapes in India and across the world show such perverted sexual mentality of a male-dominated society where women are treated just an object of pleasure and thereby relegated to the margins to suffer.

However, Rustomji becomes a victim of marginalised community when he is stuck in the Bombay Public being rude to them as someone from the bus spits on him and his entire dress gets coloured with *Paan* stain. At first, he expresses his anger in these words, “ ‘Sala

gandoo! Filthy son of a whore! Shameless animal – spitting paan from the bus! Smash your face I will, you pimp.....’ ” ( Mistry, AC 20).

The incident makes him a miserable and helpless marginalised character as he is targeted by the crowd for being abusive for them. However, “Auspicious Occasions” is a microcosm of the idiosyncrasy, feeling of being marginalised through social exclusion of the Parsi community in a nation dominated by Hindu population.

### **Conflict between Modernity and Traditionalism**

The Parsi community seems to be on the verge of dilemma in maintaining their old ways of religious life. Mistry addresses this swing of mood among the Parsi characters how they are attracted towards the forces of modernity. In “Condolence Visit (CV)”, Daulat, who has just suffered the loss of her husband, does not wish to mourn before her neighbours, which she feels as quite unnatural to her behaviour. Such straight and bold display of Daulat’s demeanour shocks her neighbours who have come for the condolence visit. Even, she wishes to escape the psychological torture that she would be going during the condolence visit by her neighbours:

Daulat stopped herself. Ah, the bitter thoughts of a tired old woman. But of what use? It was better not to think of these visits which were as inevitable as Minocher’s death. The only way out was to lock up the flat and leave Firozsha Baag, live elsewhere for the next few weeks. (Mistry, CV 72)

In “Exercisers”, Mistry shows the protagonist Jehangir’s departure from the traditional ways of life and embracing more secular and modern ways as he defies his parents and their spiritual advisor by dating a non-Parsi woman:

‘Maybe it is because you have changed so much that we fret.....More and more selfish you seem to be now.....That your new life in college, and your new friends, and that girl – Behroze – have changed you.’ (Mistry, *Exercisers* 258)

## **Narrative of Cultural Diaspora in Parsi Community**

Mistry addresses the issue of cultural diaspora in “The Swimming Lessons (*SL*)” as its protagonist Kersi always lives in the world of alienation and nostalgia due to his diasporic experience in Canada. He feels trouble in adjusting to his new life in Canada. He feels dislocated from this modern Canadian culture as his swimming course proves to be a fiasco for him:

It’s a mistake, of course. This time I’m scared even to venture in the shallow end. When everyone has entered the water and I’m the only one outside, I feel a little foolish and slide in. (Mistry, *SL* 288)

According to Mistry’s notion, Kersi does feel at home in with the western life style completely. He takes recourse to nostalgia and fantasy to assuage his loneliness and alienation around him.

## **Conclusion**

Mistry, in “Tales from Firozsha Baag”, unfolds the in-depth experience of the Parsi characters where they keep struggling between the forces of changes and the forces of continuity. All the Parsi characters in the stories feel a sense of alienation against the wider structure of society which is dominated by the Hindu community. Mistry is also aware of the fastest diminishing rate of the Parsi demography. In one of his interviews he says:

There are only 1,20,000 Parses in the world. So it is not a threat or a delusion that they are on the verge of disappearance. What is 60,000 in a city [Bombay] of 12 million? And it is when anything disappears in this world, any a pity species, man, animal or insect (Bhrucha 43)

Such pangs of being extinct is a genesis of all the works of Mistry where he consistently reflects the glorious past and social status of the Parsi community, which now are on the verge of marginalisation. Moreover, “Tales from Firozsha Baag” unfolds the inner and outer conflict of characters that how the community torn between the tradition and modernity. Many characters in *TFB* reject the ongoing old ways of Zoroastrianism and switch over towards growing modernity along with other various forces of life.

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