

# Construction of Home, Nation and Identity in Rohinton Mistry's *Tales from Firozsha Baag*

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## Abstract

*Rohinton Mistry is one of the central figures of the Indian diaspora involved in the task of constructing alternative narratives of national identity. His texts articulate a new conception of the nation by problematising the stable and unitary configurations of national-cultural identity. Mistry's experience and awareness of the complex tensions of his cultural and geographical location in the diaspora are evident in *Tales from Firozsha Baag*. Mistry implies that because the Parsi culture is constituted by heteroglossia, there is no such thing as a 'purely' Parsi identity. In destabilising notions of a self-enclosed Parsi identity, he goes for inserting the 'other' into his Parsi narratives: for instance, Gajra, the Marathi maid, in "Auspicious Occasion"; Francis, the Christian man who does odd-jobs, in "One Sunday"; and Jaakaylee, the Catholic Goan ayah, in "The Ghost of Firozsha Baag". "Swimming Lessons" is the only story set entirely outside the Parsi area of the Baag and in fact outside India. We move from a closed and homogenous cultural system to finally a transgressive ground where the borders between cultures are so fluid that there can no longer be any stable conception of national essences.*

**Key Words:** Diaspora, National Identity, Alternative Narrative, Heteroglossia.

## Introduction

Rohinton Mistry, whose narratives belong to outside of the dominant culture's construction of itself within the nation, has used his diasporic location to question established notions concerning the idea of home and belonging. "[T] hrobbing between two lives, the one in Bombay and the one [...] in Toronto" (Mistry 180), his migrant characters in *Tales from Firozsha Baag*, struggle with the complexities of negotiating new identities out of fragmented cultures. Mistry's work is concerned with the cultural politics of diaspora, particularly regarding its focus on the unpredictability of the signs of national identity and its question of the fixed boundaries of nations and cultures. His experience and awareness of the complex tensions of his ideological, cultural and geographical location in the diaspora have found space in all his writings.

*Tales from Firozsha Baag* is a collection of eleven intersecting stories in which Mistry exposes the rich, intertwining, complex patterns of life of the Parsi community inside an apartment building in Bombay named Firozsha Baag. The apartment building of the Baag contains Parsi families living in adjoining small rooms where there is a struggle for privacy and a desire to peep into the life of others. It is a place where "a large new refrigerator helps keep up a flow of neighbourly companionship" (Mistry 73), and many wandering vendors arrive in turn to give it an appearance of community feelings. Mistry considers the Baag as an actual Parsi habitation. Rituals of navjote, Behram roj and achu michu are often alluded to, complete with kusti, dugli and Sudras that help the community preserve its sanctity through rituals (Bhagwanrao 31-32).

In the book, Mistry presents the details of the characters' effort to find their identities in postcolonial India, and the immigrants' struggle to adapt to their new life in countries like Canada. All the characters in the book advertently or inadvertently expose the tensions between the past and the present, between the old and the new. Mistry focuses on the lives of the people of the Parsi community and narrates its conflicts by the help of various characters. Thus, the stories help us face the common aspects of Zoroastrian ethnicity. Through the numerous tales of the Firozsha Baag, Mistry peeps into the lives and eccentricities of the Parsi inhabitants.

The aim of the article is to analyse the way Tales from Firozsha Baag articulates a new conception of the nation by problematising the stable and unitary configurations of national-cultural identity. Although the residential complex of Firozsha Baag describes the Parsi identity, Mistry disrupts the boundaries of this identity through the use of many metaphors of movement — trips or outings by public transportation; the frequent travel between India and Canada; and the recurring use of swimming. To disrupt the notion of a purely Parsi community, Mistry includes characters from other communities. Last but not least, Mistry also introduces us with a transgressive ground where the borders between cultures are so fluid that there can no longer be any stable conception of national essences.

### **Disruption of the Notion of a Homogeneous and Self-enclosed Parsi Identity**

Stories in Tales from Firozsha Baag are told from several points of views, e.g. an elderly Goan Catholic ayah Jacqueline (Jaakaylee), a veterinarian Mr Mody and a Parsi young man Sarosh who migrates to Canada and suffers from an identity crisis. In the middle of the stories, one of the residents of the Baag Nariman Hansotia assumes the voice of Mistry in storytelling as he narrates to the gathering children the struggle and suffering of a Parsi immigrant. However, the tales do not present the Baag as a uniform, unified space. They rather depict the struggles, conflicts, and dreams of the Baag people. Although the residential area of the Baag depicts Parsi identity, Mistry very delicately disrupts this homogeneous identity through different metaphors of movement: journeys

by public transportation, taking Parsi characters away from the private space of the Baag to the public spaces of the city; the comings and goings between India and North America for education or migration; last but not least, the use of swimming as an image of journeying or asserting identity.

Mistry suggests that Parsi identity is not pure or homogeneous but is subject to interaction with other cultural systems. It, however, maintains its sense of difference. Mistry includes the 'other' into his Parsi narratives to undermine the notion of a self-enclosed Parsi identity, e.g. Gajra, the Marathi maid in "Auspicious Occasion"; Francis, the Christian man who does odd job in "One Sunday"; and Jaakaylee, the Goan Ayah in "The Ghost of Firozsha Baag". Gabriel states, "[T] his background presence of the cultural Other is made explicit in 'The Ghost of Firozsha Baag', which is narrated entirely from the perspective of the elderly Goan, [...] ayah, Jaakaylee, whose name is actually a vulgarization by the Parsi tongue of her 'English' name, Jacqueline (260). The ayah's first-person narrative is a recollection of her personal history: ranging from her birth in the former Portuguese colony of Goa to her long fifty years of service in the Baag. Stories like "Auspicious Occasion", "One Sunday", "The Ghost of Firozsha Baag", "Condolence Visit", "The Collectors", "Of White Hairs and Cricket", "The Paying Guest", and "The Exercisers" focus on the experiences and the identity problems of a Parsi community in Bombay while "Squatter", "Lend Me Your Light", and "Swimming Lessons" deal with the impact and identity crisis of migration on the lives of young Parsi protagonists abroad.

In Tales from Firozsha Baag, Mistry represents Parsi life and culture from the perspectives of the non-Parsi 'other', which is to some extent full of biases and prejudices. As we go through the narration of Jaakaylee, we feel that in spite of her prejudices regarding Parsis, she has been changed by the very culture in which she is a stranger. However, although she has lost her cultural association, she has also replaced the Parsi dhansak as the Karanis' favourite dish by her hot Goan curries. According to Gabriel, "With this, the space of the Karani household and, by extension, that of Firozsha Baag, becomes a metaphor for the shifting configurations of Parsi

cultural identity” (261). Since the Parsi community of the Baag carries the presence of other voices, other histories and other memories, and since the Parsi culture is constituted by heteroglossia, there is no such thing as perfect Parsi identity, untouched by difference. Gabriel again argues that through different stories, set in Bombay and Toronto, we move from a cohesive cultural system to a transgressive territory “where the borders between cultures are so fluid that there can no longer be any stable conception of national essences” (262). Mistry’s (re)configuration of cultural identity as fluid and changing is associated with the way he places his migrant narratives about the Canadian national imaginary. He has objected the way the narrative of the migrant writer has been constructed by the discourse of the dominant culture and has underscored the notion of multiculturalism. Smaro Kamboureli states,

I think they [the dominant culture] feel that when a person arrives here [Canada] from a different culture if that person is a writer, he must have some profound observations about the meeting of the two cultures. And he must write about multiculturalism. He has an area of expertise foisted on him which he may not certainly want, or which may not necessarily interest him. He may not want to be an expert in race relations. (387)

Let me come to the issue of double displacement or double marginalisation. As a Parsi, Mistry belongs to a minority community in India which fled to India from Iran to avoid Islamic oppression. Thus, it can be argued that as an Indian of Persian heritage, Mistry was in diaspora even in India. Mistry’s act of locating his narrative outside Hindu India suggests that there is no space for the Parsi subject in the dominant Hindu national narrative. The violent history of diaspora has further made it quite impossible for Parsis to speak from a unified cultural narrative. This marginalisation of the Parsi narrative has created a sense of loss and isolation. Unlike most migrant writers who speak of their experiences of racism and other racial violence in their newly adopted home, Mistry’s location as a Canadian of Indian-Parsi origin depicts a common experience of racism in both Canada and India. Mistry’s attempt to reconfigure the dominant narrative of the nation is done by rejecting the hegemonic underpinning of the multiculturalism of Canadian society.

The first story “Auspicious Occasion” highlights the traditional life and practices of a Parsi couple who to affirm the uniqueness of their minority in Bombay observe all important days of their community. According to Peter Morey, “The story highlights the central conundrum faced by Parsis in the modern world, where they have to balance the requirements of tradition with the need for change to keep up with modernity” (Morey 34). Rustomji secretly “enjoy[s] most of the age-old traditions while pretending indifference” but is well aware of the fact that these “customs [are] dead and meaningless” (Mistry 8). These very customs distinguish him from the non-Parsis he has contempt for. Rustomji’s hypocrisy is evident in his contemptuous behaviour against the non-Parsi servants and his sexual fantasies for the maid Gajra, who is derogatively called *ghati* by him. However, in spite of the Parsis’ communal contempt for the non-Parsis, the community is not as united as it seems. We notice a sort of shift in the structures within the Parsi community through modernisation when the blessed occasion of Behram Raj becomes the most ominous — the fire temple priest is murdered by a Parsi and not by a that. This act of murder of a Parsi by a fellow Parsi stands for communal decay, depicting a picture of the decaying minority.

To depict the waning forces within the Parsi community Mistry talks about jealousy, everyday disputes and the occasional fight between Parsis. In the second story “One Sunday”, which deals with the notion of Parsis as subaltern, Mistry draws a picture of different characters with an impression of Indianness in their mindset, behaviour, and psychology. In the story, Najamai, the only owner of a refrigerator, feels proud of it and considers the Parsi neighbours who have benefited from it a nuisance. While the neighbours are happy to use the fridge, they are secretly jealous of her and her wealth. There seems to exist a clear dichotomy between the privileged and the less privileged within the Parsi community. According to Bhagwanrao, “The community’s interdependence is almost anathema to many residents of the bag though it is determined by a common need to bind together as a community (Bhagwanrao 34). Another of Mistry’s short story “Of White hairs and Cricket”, which weaves several

sub-themes into one big tale, symbolically represents Mistry's childhood in Bombay where he intersects fact and fiction while at the same time employs the first-person narrative to depict Parsis as a decaying and dying race.

#### Migration and the Resulting Isolation and Split Identity

As the author profiles various Parsi characters in the course of various stories, he introduces Nariman Hansotia, who is a resident of the Baag and who later becomes the author's voice in the storytelling. Malak argues that being the storyteller of the Baag, Nariman is transformed into Mistry himself, "function[ing] as the tribal spokesman" with his "repository of the community's heritage" (Malak 190). Nariman acts as the preserver of the Parsi culture and heritage when he talks about the Parsi anxieties of identity and displacement to the gathering boys. As a mouthpiece of the Parsi community, he defines the nature of Parsi hybridity which focuses only on selective assimilation: "In spite of the community's cohesion and their efforts at preserving its distinctiveness, the Parsi identity is fragmented — turning more protean and unfixed in the modern times" (Bhagwanrao 37-38). To focus more on the changes in the Parsi community in recent times, Mistry highlights the immigration of Parsis to Canada and America after the relaxation of immigration laws in the 1970s.

In "Squatter", Mistry has brought the cultural space of two diverse nation — India and Canada — through Nariman's narrative of a Parsi boy Sarosh. Sarosh immigrates to Canada but promises to return if he fails to "become completely Canadian in exactly ten years" (Mistry 187). The act of changing his name from Sarosh to Sid signifies his desire to become a true Canadian and to erase his Indian identity. However, his inability to use Western toilet stands for his cultural displacement and his failure to blend in: "If he could not be westernized in all aspects, he was nothing but a failure in this land — a failure not just in the washrooms of the nation but everywhere" (Mistry 196). However, his attempts to shed his identity cause alienation and displacement. Sarosh finds life in India incompatible and at the same time feels alienated in Canada. Although he decides to solve his toilet problem through a CNI (Crappus Non-Interruptus) operation, the doctor

informs him that the CNI operation can only help to change his squatting habit and that it does not make any difference to his identity. Sarosh's memory of home and his experiences in Canada somehow place him in a grey zone between the two cultures.

Sarosh stands for all those Indian immigrants who want to completely blend into their adopted land but fail to forget their ethnic and cultural past, and thus suffer from a sense of loss and identity crisis. Sarosh's suffering is just like that of Mistry — his memory of childhood Bombay is completely different from the city's present scenario. It is impossible for someone to return completely to his/her own culture, once implanted in another culture. Through Sarosh's experience of the ambivalence of diaspora, Mistry talks about his inability to return to a life he had left behind with his decision to immigrate:

My Bombay is rooted in fact, but I'm writing concerning a city that has passed. In 1975, when I left, its population was less than half what it is today, and that modifies a city in unimaginable ways. If I'd never left, I would have adjusted and received the mechanisms of coping, as the other 14 million inhabitants have. Today when I go back I feel like a marathon runner who's no longer in training. I'm forever suspended between the two cultures. I have no choice. (Lambert 7)

Sarosh's dislocation and inability to adjust to the Canadian culture is facilitated by the Canadian Multicultural Department. Mistry believes terms such as "mosaic and melting pot are both nonsense and ethnic is a polite way of saying bloody foreigner" (Mistry 194). According to Sharmani Gabriel, "Squatter" exposes the problems that arise when "multicultural state fails to include the ethnic subject in the national imaginary" (Gabriel "Interrogating Multiculturalism" 33).

In the story "Land Me Your Light", Mistry considers the issue of ethnic identity of the immigrants and emphasises the problems encountered by the diasporas by comparing and contrasting the lives of two friends — Jamshed who symbolises 'American Dream', and Kersi who migrates to Canada but tries to retain his ethnic identity thereby trying to "become a member of Zoroastrian society of Ontario, hoping to meet people from Bombay" (Mistry 220). Kersi considers immigration to be painful since it involves

severing ties with the homeland. Although in Canada, he finds himself in affluence and success, his inner side remains chaotic. His inability to find happiness in Canada and to completely forsake the motherland creates dilemma and identity crisis in him, which is reflected when he compares himself with Tiresias: “blind and throbbing between two lives, the one in Bombay and the other in Toronto. [...] guilty of the sin of hubris for seeking emigration out of the land of my birth” (Mistry 217). Kersi’s success in Canada comes with nostalgia and fascination and an inability to forget his homeland. However, upon return to India, he is disgusted by the “hostility and tension” of Bombay, which now appears “dirtier than ever” (226). This mutual confusion leads him to a split mental condition, especially when he observes his brother Percy is working for improving the condition of the destitute farmers in rural India.

Unlike Kersi, who is caught in a dilemma between his homeland and the adopted home, Jamshed is completely disgusted with his native land. He possesses high ambitions, dreams of material success, detests India and decides to migrate to America to escape the grips of corruptions in his country. He shows his abhorrence against India: “absolutely no future in this stupid place, there just [aren’t] any prospects” (Mistry 215). Jamshed manages to merge completely in American culture and embraces its values and customs. He strongly believes that unlike Indians, Americans and Canadians do not possess the mean mentality and thus being an American or a Canadian is better than being an Indian. Jamshed seems to have forgotten his ethnic past and indigenous culture and is a perfect example of complete integration in the West. He fully identifies himself with the American melting pot and erases everything of his past. Kersi believes that like most of the immigrants, Jamshed is almost resolute to see the worst of India. Kersi is ambivalent in his attitude: He does not reject Bombay as strongly as Jamshed, nor does he accept Bombay like Percy. Kersi attempts his best to love India, which they all have left and to convince themselves of a pretentious sense of patriotism which they cannot feel. Like many other immigrants, he feels less faceless in his adopted land by fantasising the old folks at home. Towards the end of the story, Kersi becomes more

alienated from everything Indian but more fascinated with everything foreign — an attitude which culminates in a deep-seated guilt to him. He becomes a failure not only in adapting himself to the new land but also blinding towards his identity as an Indian.

In the story “Swimming Lesson”, where the narrative shifts from the third person narrative about Indian past to the first-person narrative about Canadian present, the protagonist Kersi feels alienated from his Indian inheritance and the Canadian culture around him. It compares his past as a child in the Baag, Bombay with his present migrant life in Toronto, Canada. In spite of living in Canada, Kersi is forced by her parents to keep his Parsi lineage up, “remind[ing] him he is a Zoroastrian: manashambi, gavashni, kunshani [good thoughts, good words, good deeds],” and to “say his prayers and do kusti at least twice a day” (284). According to Bhagwanrao, “While the parents stay anxious about the ancestry he must stay true to, the diasporic status makes their son live on his Indianness and its relation with his Parsi identity” (41). As a consequence, Kersi feels that he has two identities: Indian and Canadian. Although he rejects his Indian identity, he still does not feel at home in Canada; he faces rejection in the land of white men. In the story, the nations of India and Canada are represented as being interconnected, as being constituted by and constituting each other. According to Gabriel, “Like Indianness, Canadianness is in continual process, in a constant state of revision that does not preclude other alliances, other affinities, other identifications.” (Gabriel 277). She goes on saying, “[W]hat Mistry articulates through Kersi is that every national narrative reveals the constitutive presence of other voices, claims, memories, in the process stretching and extending the idea of imagined communities across the static borders that presently construct national-cultural identity” (277). Gabriel’s statement highlights the importance of the stories of the marginalised in the national narrative.

Most interestingly and crucially, the use of water, which is the most decisive metaphor of the story, indicates Mistry’s notion of the transitionality of cultural identity. The recurring imagery of water, be it in the form of swimming in Chaupatty beach Bombay or the swimming pool of the apartment

complex in Toronto, suggests Mistry's need to create space for new paradigms to consider national identities. Water is presented as a symbol of life and rebirth, which leaves him frustrated, given "the swimming pool, like Chaupatty beach, produced a still-birth" in terms of his swimming skills (Mistry 289). Kersi's inability to feel at home in India is symbolised in his inability to swim in Chaupatty beach mainly because of its dirty water. Again, his failure to integrate in Canada is reflected in his fright of the swimming pool. However, he tries his best to conquer this fear of swimming and slowly learns to open his eyes underwater: "I am slowly able to discern the underwater objects. The drain plug looks different, slightly distorted; [...] I come up [...] examine quickly the overwater world and go in again. ... The world outside the water I have seen a lot of, it is now time to see what is inside" (Mistry 249). According to Sharmani Gabriel, the fact that Kersi is able to see 'overwater' and 'underwater' at the same time forms the plural consciousness produced by this space of creative syncretism: "Thus, the 'lesson' Mistry teaches requires a movement away from a world conceived in binary terms to one which disrupts the spatial and temporal coherence of a closed system to offer a new, more flexible, cartography for the construction of national identity" (Gabriel 279). Here, Mistry emphasises the need to destabilise the concept of static boundaries, in particular, those give rise to the idea of closed cultures.

In "Swimming Lessons", the migrants are also shown to receive racially offensive behaviour at the swimming pool. The common pool becomes "a hangout of some racist group, bent on eliminating non-white swimmers, to keep their waters pure and their white sisters unglued" (Mistry 288). This ethnic or cultural difference proves that multiculturalism itself is based on the imposition of a fixed idea of difference. Although Canada offers multiculturalism, racism is uncontrollable, and a Parsi is defined as a 'Paki' who "smell[s] like curry" (289). Although multiculturalism is supposed to promote harmony between various ethnic groups, it creates differences among them.

## Conclusion

Through his diasporic discourse, Mistry has well depicted his family background, his community's confined situation in big cities like Bombay and his deep attachment with and nostalgia for a bygone world. The stories in *Tales from Firozsha Baag* are divided into a composite space between two worlds and cultures. Characters in the stories can neither forget the world and culture they have come from, nor can they incorporate into the culture they have adopted. Since their native world and culture will be different to them if they return and since they fail to assert their identities in the adopted world, they suffer from loss, isolation, nostalgia and identity crisis. As Tapping comments, "Mistry is engaged in identity construction through the location of the present in the past" (37). Mistry has depicted the experiences of the migrants and the pain of not being in their native land so vividly and brilliantly that he has given diaspora fiction a new stature. I have also demonstrated how Mistry has portrayed Parsis in the *Baag* as a heterogeneous community, revealing their internal conflict, jealousy and hypocrisy. Mistry's tales connect Bombay and Canada, past and present, and thus builds a ground on which he can probe into the discourse of the notion of home, nation and identity.

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