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Full Length Research Paper**Tales from Firozsha Baag: Preserving Parsi Ethnicity****Abdul Ahad**

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Corresponding Author:**Abdul Ahad**Research scholar,
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Allahabad, Allahabad,
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Rohinton Mistry, an expatriate Indian-Parsi writer who lives in Canada, published his short-story collection *Tales from Firozsha Baag* in 1987, which is set in a "Parsibaag", an apartment complex in Bombay. In this unique writing, a post-colonial situation is to be seen as he embodies a kind of double diasporic situation. The Parsis are a migrant community who made India their home during the 8th-10th Century A.D. But since 1947, the elite and Westernized Parsis have migrated in large numbers to the West. He also maps the marginalization and loneliness, and looks at the anguish of the Parsi way of life which is also wrapped up in the thick coverings of Parsi ethnicity. *Tales from Firozsha Baag* also portrays diverse facets of Indian socio-economic life, as well Parsi Zoroastrian life, customs, and religion. The stories, many of which were published separately in modified version, came together to provide a glimpse into the community.

Keywords: Parsi, Diaspora, Postcolonial, Ethnicity, Loneliness**Introduction**

Comparatively recent development, short story is one of the most famous genres in English literature. However, the stories existed before human being started writing and was being narrated from one generation to the other orally. Later with the development of language it was written but in verse until the Age of Chaucer. The contemporary Short Story was made popular by Edgar Allen Poe in America, R. L. Stevenson, Rudyard Kipling and H. G. Wells in England, Goethe and Guy de Maupassant in France, and Munshi Premchandra, Rabindranath Tagore, R. K. Narayan and Ruskin Bond in India. In a short story economy of words is most important and the author is supposed to use only to-the-point words. Some scholars are of the view that it should not be in less than 1000 words and not more than 20000 words, but there is no official demarcation and most accepted view is that it is a story that can be read in a single sitting. In it "plot is confined to essentials, characters to the indispensable and the setting to a few suggestive hints", (Prasad) and anything that cannot contribute to the advancement of story should be avoided or it leads nowhere.

Categorized into two, the story of character and the story of incident, Short Story use all the elements, techniques and types of novel and is written in various available points of view. The story of character focuses on the character's thoughts, motivation, and psychology while the story of incident talks about events and its happening. The first story of the collection "*Auspicious Occasion*" is the "story of incident" which deals with the incident (mis)happening, such as the murder of Dustoor Dhunjisha, manhandling of Rustomji by the urchins, and the leaking of the toilet-waste just on Rustomji on the auspicious Occasion of *Behram Roje*, and "Of White Hairs and Cricket" is the story of character while being nostalgic. In "*Of White Hairs and Cricket*" the narrator while plucking the white hairs from the head of his ageing father thinks about the past when his father used to be young and took the children of the society to Chaupatti beach for cricket. This story is written in a form which brings it near stream of consciousness but not actually is. While the third one, "*Squatter*", has omniscient and invisible narrator and is about Nariman Hansotia, who occasionally tells didactic story, about Savukshaw the cricketer, the bicyclist, the hunter, and the story of Sid (sarosh) to the boys of Firozsha Baag.

The paper intends to study the Parsi ethnicity depicted in the *Tales from Firozsha Baag* and for this purpose three stories have been chosen: "*Auspicious Occasion*", "*Of White Hairs and Cricket*", and "*Squatter*".

Prasi: Background

First landed in Diu in 8th century, the Parsis were given shelter in Sanjan (Gujrat) by the then Hindu King, Jadhav Rana. When the Parsis came, communication was the biggest problem between the natives and the newly arrived Zoroastrian community. Then the king commanded his men to bring a bowl of milk symbolizing there was no room in his Kingdom. The Parsis with their ready wit, added a few grains of sugar in the bowl indicating that they would mingle with them just like the sugar in the milk adding sweetness to it. The King gave shelter to the Parsis, but on a few conditions: firstly, they will have to adopt the language of Gujrat instead of their native language. Secondly the women would dress themselves in Saree and would not wear their traditional Persian attire. Thirdly

men would have to handover all their weapons and like the natives venerate the cow. And lastly, they would have to perform all marriages only after sunset.

Historians, about the origin of Aryans, are of different views and believe in their own theories. B. G. Tilak is of the view that Aryans came from Arctic Region, while A.C. Dass tells their origin in Sapta Sindhu or the Pajab region, Swami Dyanand Saraswati Tibet, Nehring Russia, Pokorny a wide region in Russia between Weser and Vistula, Brandistein Kirgiz steppe, Nazi/ German Scholars Germani, Morgan Western Serbia, Jairozbhoy west of Caspian Sea, Prof. Mac Donnel Eastern Europe, Dr. Gills Austria and Hungary, Dr. Subhash Kak India. The most relevant and widely accepted view is given by Max Muller who speculated that the Aryans came to India from Central Asia. The Parsis who came from the present day Iran, traditionally worship fire. Historians like Ramchandra Guha have theorized that, religions born of settled agricultural communities tend to seek Divinity in localized and fixed natural objects, which those born of nomadic communities seek the divine in abstractions like light and the star. The Parsi worship of fire occupies a liminal space between these two forms of worship. Fire is both tangible and abstract. Also, it links the Parsi faith to the ancient Vedic religion which grew around fire sacrifices (havan).

Much is written on the life, culture and customs of the Parsis. And many literary works are themed on this small ethnic group. The Parsis have always been a very small community. However, their visibility has been much more in comparison to their actual number. Their contribution to business, politics, art and literature made them widely regarded as an ideal minority. We never hear of any organized protest by the Parsi community and it would appear that they are well integrated into the society. This picture is subverted by the works of many Parsi writers who look below the calm surface and reveal angst, anxiety and dissatisfaction within the Parsi community. As for as the Parsis' Patriotism is concerned, Dadabhai Navroji's statement is very important: "*Whether I am a Hindu, a Mohmedan, a Parsi, a Christian, or any other creed. I am above all an Indian. Our country is India, Our nationality is Indian.*"

It is estimated that the community is declining by 12% every census decade while India's population increases by 21%. New and fresh blood is needed for the survival of this community because in it only intra-marriage is allowed and cousin marriages are common, so are the effects of inbreeding. A 1908 judgment of the Bombay High Court reiterated that the Parsi is an ethnic entity restricted to the descendants of those Persian refugees, though the logic may look askance at such racial purity maintained over a millennium. The judge had added that the child of a mixed marriage could be included in this definition only when the father is Parsi. Liberals, scholars and intermarried women have opposed such discrimination. But all these have always been battered down by the orthodox Parsis. The Parsi writers have a very clear notion that the community is disappearing very rapidly and now constitute only 0.005% of the total population of India. Therefore, they try hard to preserve their customs, religion and their ethnicity through literature.

Rohinton Mistry

Rohinton Mistry, a famous diasporic Parsi writer who now lives in Canada, continues to make India, Bombay and the Parsi community the focus of his writing. In order to understand the nuances of Mistry's writing we need to see him from various lenses: the diasporic, the Parsi and the post-colonial. As a diasporic writer Rohinton Mistry shows some typically diasporic characteristics like nostalgia, exile and the use of a language liberally sprinkled with Indianisms, Gujrati and the Parsi language. Most of his novels and short stories focus on the Parsi community and in case of *Tales from Firozsha Baag* exclusively from Bombay.

Mistry's writing uniquely captures the Parsi way of life. He focuses on the predicament of the Parsis which is characterized by large scale migration of the younger generation and the consequent loneliness of the older generation that lives on in India. It is to be noted that the Parsis are a micro community. Once a flourishing and wealthy community that was a part of the elite, both during Mughal and British rule, the Parsis are dwindling now. During the Mughal Era the Parsis were an important community and close to the ruling class because they spoke Farsi. With the coming of British rule, the Parsi community acquired the English language and thus retained their links with the ruling class. The Parsis today have dwindled into a micro-community. The religious rule which forbids intermarriage and conversion to the Parsi faith has resulted in an alarming fall in the Parsi population. It is the sense of being endangered and on the verge of extinction that makes records of the Parsi way of life *Tales from Firozsha Baag* very important and valuable. An important aspect of the Post-colonial theory is the questioning of the nation. According to Anderson for a nation to feel united even in the post-colonial situation it must have a sense of "*deep, horizontal comradeship*". The maps of the most modern post-colonial States is what they have inherited from the colonial rule. When the colonial master was identifiable by his alien race and language, it was possible to unite the various communities and ethnicities together to put up a common fight against the colonial master. With the withdrawal of Imperialism, the newly independent Nations and /or States have to now face internal dissention, civil war and other social disturbances because the older fissures within the Nation begin surfacing with the withdrawal of the white masters.

Mistry's Short Stories

In "*The Auspicious Occasion*", the first story of the *Tales from Firozsha Baag*, Rohinton Mistry reveals the Parsi life, culture, tradition and their religion as well. The story is centered around Rustomji and his wife Mehroo, almost twenty years junior to him. Through the story Mistry depicts the life of a lower-middle class Parsi family. The Parsis, living a better life in Mughal era and during British rule as mentioned above, have no privilege in the post-colonial era, living a common life. The story collection, set after the withdrawal of

Imperialism, deals with the plight the Parsi family is in. In the story “*Auspicious Occasion*”, Rustomji finds that somebody spits *Paan* on his white *Dugli*. He is ridiculed by the urchins who laugh at his predicament and taunt him by calling him Parsi *Bawaji*:

‘What happened? Who hurt the...’

‘Tch tch, someone spat paan on his dugli...’

‘Heh heh heh! Bawaji got paan pichkari right on his white dugli...’

Bawaji bawaji, dugli looks very nice now, red and white, just like in Technicolor...’ (p.20)

It is very clear that Rustomji is not acceptable in the larger ethos of Bombay. Though the entire story is written in the lighter vein, the pain of the ageing Rustomji and his bewilderment at being identified as an outsider in his native Bombay (Mumbai) is the whole point of the short story.

The Parsis, however, maintained their culture and tradition in the alien world too. They followed their own religious ceremonies as is seen in context of Mehroo’s family, “Which observed all important days on the Parsi Calendar, had the appropriate prayers and ceremonies performed at the fire-temple, and even set aside a room with an iron-frame bed and an iron stool for the women during their unclean time of month.” (p.3)

Behram roje (Parsi New Year) is a very important in Parsi community but for Mehroo it is more important because she was born on *Behram roje*, married off to Rustomji on this ‘auspicious occasion’ and her *navjote* was performed on this day when she was seven years old. *Navajote* is ceremony on which a child is inducted into the Zoroastrianism by the Parsi priest and the child starts wearing *Sedhreh* and *Kushti*. *Novajote* is also known as *Sedreh pushi* in Iran.

The Parsi, like Jews, is a closed-door community *i.e.* it does not allow conversion and intermarriages and therefore it has developed serious concerns. Low birth-rate, late marriages and age-gap between husband and wife are facts of Parsi life. This is seen in “*Auspicious Occasion*” Rustomji, when he was thirty-two, married sixteen-year-old Mehroo.

In “Of White Hairs and the Cricket” the narrator’s father has lost his job and on every Sunday, while poring over the classified section of the *Times of India*, employs his son to tweeze his white hairs in order to look young and so that he could get a job. However, the story seems to be written in stream of consciousness style and is not true. The narrator turns towards the past when his father used to take him and his friends to Chaupatti for cricket and everything seemed to be perfect. The white hairs, in the story, stands for the days of insecurity in post-independent India when the Parsis are unprivileged, while the cricket symbolizes the untroubled past-days during the British rule.

The Parsi community is not untouched by the immigration. In the “*Squatter*” there are only young boys, the listener and the Nariman Hansotia, the narrator. No youth is seen, even Vera, Dolly and Sarosh who are talked of are abroad. Some of the young boys too are already planning to go abroad as is seen by Hansotia’s interruption to the group of the boys, “Sorry to disturb your conference, boys, and your meditation, Jehagir but I thought you would like to hear this story. Especially since some of you are planning to go abroad.” (p.183, 184)

In “*Squatter*” there are stories within story about Savukshaw, the cricketer, the bicyclist, the hunter and the painter and Sarosh. Double diasporic situation is seen in the story. Vera and Dolly are already settled abroad. When the story starts, it has been ten years since Sarosh is living in Toronto. Sarosh, to change himself into a complete Canadian did everything possible but could not succeed. He changed his name from Sarosh to Sid but was not able to use the Western toilet properly which is the evidence of his incompleteness. He had to sit in Indian style on the Western seat. He started feeling alienated throughout his stay on the new land. He did not want to reveal it to others as seen in these lines:

In his own apartment Sarosh squatted barefoot. Elsewhere, if he had to go with his shoes on, he would carefully cover the seat with toilet paper before climbing up. He learnt to do this after the first time, when his shoes had left telltale footprints on the seat. He had to clean it with a wet paper towel, luckily, no one had seen him. (P.188). Rinton Mistry, while living in Canada and writing about India, is fully aware of the decreasing Parsi community. Like other works, *Tales from Firozsha Baag* is concerned with the preservation of the ethnic identity of community. In the words of V.L.V.N Narendra Kumar, “The Parsees are attempting to assert their ethnic identity in diverse ways. Parsee novel in English reflects this assertion of Parsi identity.”

Linguistic hybridization is very common in the works of Parsi writers. In case of Rinton Mistry is no exception. He uses words like *bawaji*, and *arre* in “*Auspicious Occasion*”, *duleendar*, and *bunya*, in “*White Hairs and the Cricket*” while *Sahibji*, and *mua* in “*Squatter*”. Rinton Mistry did not hesitate to use the obscene words. In the very first story “*Auspicious Occasion*”, Rustomji abuses the person who has spit paan on his dugli: “*salaah gandoo!* Filthy son of a whore! Shameless animal – spitting *paan* from the bus! Smash your face I will, you pimp...” When the crowd starts making fun of him, he turns towards it and abuses: “*arre* you sisterfucking *ghatis*, what are you looking for? Have you no *shame*? *Saala chootia* spat *paan* on my *dugli* and you think that is fun?” (p.20). Use of local language, colloquial and slang is part of the project of Post-colonialism. The Postcolonial writers consciously

resist in writing the idiom of British English. The Postcolonial authors' aim is to appropriate the English language and modify it to make a conducive for the expression of a local sensibility and regional experience. As poet Auden had prophetically proclaimed that language is modified in the guts of living.

Salman Rushdie was the first significant voice to introduce this hybridity in Indian English. His concept of Chutnification becomes important in this context. Chutnification means transformation of a language having an additional connotation of making language, used in the writing, tangy and more flavorsome and exciting. Chutney is an Indian dish, which is a side dish and tangy, adding flavor to the main course of any meal. Therefore, it is pertinent to observe that Mistry has kept in mind major Post-colonial trend of writing and fused it with his deep and empathic understanding of the Parsi community.

Conclusion

To conclude it can be said that the stories in *Tales from Firozsha Baag*, are snapshots the Parsi way of life. Most notably the paper focuses on "Auspicious Occasion", "Of White Hairs and Cricket", and "Squatter", based on Parsi way of living, their tradition, culture, and their status, are ethnicity preserving stories. The first story "Auspicious Occasion" details about their culture and their situation through the character of Rustomji and his wife Mehroo. In the story "Of White Hairs and Cricket" the narrator while plucking the white hairs from his father's head thinks about the past when his father would take them to play cricket that is not possible now. This story is symbolic of the glorious days of the Parsis during the Raj. "Squatter", which shows the double diasporic situation, deals with the story of a person who went Canada, changed his name from Sarosh to Sid to be fully Canadian but failed and returned to India again.

Recommendations

It is recommended that a similar analysis focusing on the Parsi way of life in India and how it has and adapted to western life style be attempted especially focusing on Rohinton Mistry's novel.

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