Navigating Two Worlds: Identity and Belonging in Rohinton Mistry's *Tales from Firozsha Baag*

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ABSTRACT

Rohinton Mistry's *Tales from Firozsha Baag* explores the diasporic consciousness among the characters in his short stories collection. The stories revolve around the Parsi community that wants a better prospect in Canada or the United States. This study tries to examine migration, which affects the individual and collective identities of the residents of Firozsha Baag. The stories also picturize the emotional and psychological battle of the characters who try to cope with dislocation, nostalgia, and cultural erosion in the process of assimilation into the western society. This paper tries to analyse the dual nature of the characters and argues that Mistry's portrayal of migration is not merely a physical dislocation but an existential rupture, with implications of cultural continuity and personal identity.
Keywords: Diaspora, Dislocation, Nostalgia, Cultural retention, Memory, Assimilation.

Diaspora can be explained as the dispersion or the spread of people from their original homeland. There are two types or kinds of diaspora. They are forced and voluntary. Forced diaspora arises from events like war or enslavement. Voluntary diaspora, as the name suggests, is out of

people's choice to move to a better place with economic opportunities. The common example of forced diaspora is the Jews who are scattered throughout the world and the Africans who are enslaved. Apart from this, there are a great deal of people who migrate voluntarily seeking better opportunities in a host land. Though these people try to assimilate into western culture they fail miserably and lead a pathetic life where they could neither return to their homeland nor stay wholeheartedly in the host land. Rohinton Mistry's *Tales from Firozsha Baag* clearly picturizes the transnational elements through the lives of the residents of an apartment complex, the Firozsha Baag, in Mumbai. His works are Parsi community centered and talks about his experience in his community. He portrays Parsi tradition and culture in almost all his works. In *Tales from Firozsha Baag*, he uses the character Kersi Boyce as his representation. Though the author lives in Canada he is stuck between the memories of his homeland and accustoming to his life in the west. The characters in the collection showcase their navigation between two lands, cultural fusion, hybridity, identity, displacement, intergenerational differences etc. This research paper employs a qualitative analysis of selected stories from *Tales from Firozsha Baag*. Stories like Squatter, Swimming Lessons, Lend Me Your Light and The Exercisers are focused.

Mistry's characters find themselves navigating between two lands to seek better opportunities. Most of the characters in the book move or aspire to move from India to the West, mostly Canada. We find Kersi Boyce, the narrator of most of the stories moving to Canada for a better living. His parents feel that he must move to Canada for the sake of his future. "My parents announced that I, too, was trying to emigrate, but to Canada, not the U.S. 'We will miss him if he gets to go,' they told Jamshed, 'but for the sake of his own future, he must" (Mistry 215). Later, he succeeds in emigrating. Though he moves to Canada, he is stuck between the memories of his homeland and his life in the west. He feels dejected and disillusioned as he does not conform to both the worlds. His life turns out to be terrible because when he visits his parents in India, he doesn't experience any kind of attachment or affinity to his country. In fact, he even thinks of what Jamshed, his brother's friend, said about no future being in his homeland. But when he returns to Canada, he says that his burden of riddles and puzzles remain

unsolved. So, it is understood that he does not have clarity about his life in Canada. “The whole sorry package was there, not lightened at all” (Mistry 233). Navigation does not happen physically alone but also metaphorically. Even those who do not leave India are caught between two cultural worlds. They struggle between the traditional Parsi life and the modern westernized living. In “Exercisers,” Jehangir, is irritated by his mother wearing a Mathoobanoo. “He warned his parents beforehand, praying that mother would take the hint and remove the Mathoobanoo from her head; the white mulmul square made her look like a backward village Parsi” (Mistry 246).

Cultural fusion is another major factor of transnationalism. The character Sarosh in Nariman Hansotia’s story wants to become a Canadian but unfortunately, he cannot assimilate into the western culture. The toilet becomes the symbol of cultural conflict. He is still bound to his Indian way of living even after seven years. Before moving to Canada, he announces to his family and friends that he will return to India if he is not able to get along with the western culture after ten years. “My dear family, my dear friends, if I do not become completely Canadian in exactly ten years from the time I land there, then I will come back. I promise. So please no more arguments. Enjoy the party” (Mistry 187). He does return to India after his failure to cope with the culture. Nariman narrates stories to the children in his residential complex making sure he uses the right English words he had learnt from the library. In “Lend Me your Light” the three characters showcase three different cultural directions. Kersi who has migrated to Canada reflects on both the cultures. The one who remains in India works for the betterment of his country whereas Jamshed who settles in United States becomes materialistic. In the story “Collectors,” Dr. Mody collects stamps, which is a western hobby. There is even cultural fusion in the language used throughout the book. The use of Indian English mixed with Gujarathi and Parsi expressions clearly states it. Language hybridity plays an important role in Cultural fusion. The residential complex, the Firozsha Baag itself is a place of cross-cultural negotiations. The story collection also has cultural hybridity as part of its themes. The characters in the *Tales from Firozsha Baag* mix, merge, and co-exist in different cultural elements. Hybridity doesn’t just mean a combination of two cultures but creation of a

'third space'. It gives room to new identities and behaviours. The character Kersi is a perfect example of cultural hybridity. Though Kersi is brought up in a conservative Parsi household he is educated in English and then he migrates to Canada. His identity is shaped by both cultures, but he does not feel at home in both. In the story "Swimming Lessons" Kersi reflects on his writing in Canada, where it is fully on the memories of Firozsha Baag. He often thinks about his past in Bombay. The past and present intersect with one another. As mentioned earlier, the character Sarosh in the story Squatter is seen juggling between two cultures. He is ashamed of his Indian habit of squatting even though he is unable to let it go. He is a hybrid figure as he is caught in between where he is not accepted in both cultures. Parsi customs rituals and superstitions coexist alongside the western influence through various factors. According to Homi Bhabha, cultural hybridity creates a 'third space' where identities are negotiated and not fixed (Bhabha 37). Perfect examples of such hybrid characters are Sarosh and Kersi. They do not assimilate to western culture, nor do they conform to indianess but remain in-between and keep evolving. The next major issue discussed is identity. The dwellers of Firozsha Baag belong to Parsi community. That is the first identity that is showcased in this book. Secondly, this identity is preserved by various rituals and practices. The Character Mehroo upholds the tradition very well in the story "Auspicious Occasion". The rituals that are to be performed during Behram Roje are strictly followed. The Character Kersi who is rooted in Indian culture while he is in Bombay absorbs Western culture when he moves to Canada. There is always a question in his mind. He struggles to understand who he is and wonders if Canada has changed him. So, he is in between. The loss of identity takes place here. He is no longer a part of Indian culture and not yet a part of Canadian.

Kersi's identity exists only in memory and not in reality. In "Squatter," the character Sarosh fails to transform his identity. Although he wants to become a Canadian, his habits remain unchanged. As mentioned earlier, Kersi experiences fragmentation as he is torn between Percy's commitment to work for the welfare of India and Jamshed's materialistic inclination in the west. He is an example of fragmented identity. He feels guilty as he thinks he has abandoned his homeland and is also confused

about his place in the world. Kersi writes about Firozsha Baag trying to reclaim the identity through his memory of his past life. He feels that writing is the only way to reconnect. Stuart Hall in his essay *Cultural identity and Diaspora* (1990) says that there are two ways to think about identity.

i) Identity as essence

ii) Identity as a process

In Identity as essence, identity is seen as something that is fixed, rooted in a culture or history. On the other hand, Identity as process is not fixed, but changes over time. Stuart Hall prefers identity as a process as there is some kind of growth in it (Hall 225). The older generation in the Firozsha Baag believes in their unchanged culture and tradition whereas the younger generation as they migrate to the western world reshapes their identity.

Displacement is not only physical relocation but is also the dislocation that happens emotionally, culturally and psychologically. Physical displacement takes place when the characters move from India to Canada or the U.S. They are uprooted from the Indian streets of Bombay into alienating environments. Kersi in the story “Swimming Lessons,” feels that he has lost the comfort of his community where he grew up, though he is free from speculations in Canada. Cultural displacement is where there is a dislocation in their culture. People who migrate to Western world adopt Western culture. Psychological displacement happens as they are mentally disconnected from their own surroundings. The character Kersi holds to his memory to preserve himself. Characters like Jaakaylee experience internal displacement. She, who belongs to Goa, has moved to Bombay for a better living.

Consequences of displacement bring in loss of belonging, identity crisis, nostalgia and idealization of the past and cultural hybridity. The characters who migrate get the feeling that they don’t belong anywhere. They belong neither to their homeland nor to their host land. The perfect example is Kersi. The other major issue they face is identity crisis. The identity they have created no longer works for them. They are forced to find out or sort out who they are. The nostalgic feeling hits the characters a lot. They also idealize their past in Firozsha Baag. Though Firozsha Baag had its own problem when

they lived, it cannot be erased from their heart. Characters in the stories always gets back to their living in Firozsha Baag to soothe their nostalgic feeling. Displacement also leads to cultural hybridity where they mix both cultures and create an unstable one. Moreover, Firozsha Baag serves as symbol of home, roots and community. The characters can only connect to their stories and imaginations, but they are forbidden to return to it as it was earlier. This clearly reflects Stuart Hall's idea that identity and narrative are reconstructed through memory and narrative.

In the *Tales from Firozsha Baag*, intergenerational difference plays a part. Often, there is a clash between the older generation and the younger generation. While the older generation is rooted in tradition, the younger generation adopts modern and westernized ideas. Some adapt and some reject these traditions. This builds a cultural tension among them also to some extent of loss or guilt. In "swimming Lessons" Kersi's mother in her letter to him reminds him the tradition that he must follow. "Mother did not believe he wore his sudra and kusti anymore, she would be very surprised if he remembered any of the prayers" (Mistry 284). It is also observed that the older generation uses Gujarathi and formal English and the younger generation uses informal westernized English. The values too differ from the older generation to younger generation. The older generation emphasizes community honour and family reputation, but the younger generation looks at personal freedom and self-discovery. The best example is Jehangir. In the aspect of religion too, the elders are traditional, but the younger generation is more secular. They even question their beliefs.

*Tales from Firozsha Baa*g is not just a collection of stories but it is like a book of Parsi living. Throughout the stories, the characters negotiate between tradition and modernity. The book is also a thorough scrutiny of diasporic consciousness where navigating between two lands becomes a metaphor. The work also has portrayal of cultural fusion and hybridity. Mistry tries to expose the community's evolvement while adapting to western influence and clings to Parsi tradition. As Stuart Hall says, identity is never fixed but it is continuously reshaped through history, memory and the lived realities of migration. Displacement brings in the in-between concept where the characters neither

belong to the homeland nor to the host land. Along with this comes the intergenerational difference where the ideas and living of the older generation collide with the younger generation.

In conclusion, Rohinton Mistry gives us a picture of a community that is fragmented between survival and adaptation. The quest for belongingness goes into the realm of transition.

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