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## Diasporic Elements in Rohinton Mistry's *Tales from Firozsha Baag*

B. Tamilselvi, M.A., B.Ed., M.Phil.



### Rohinton Mistry – Double Diasporic Experience

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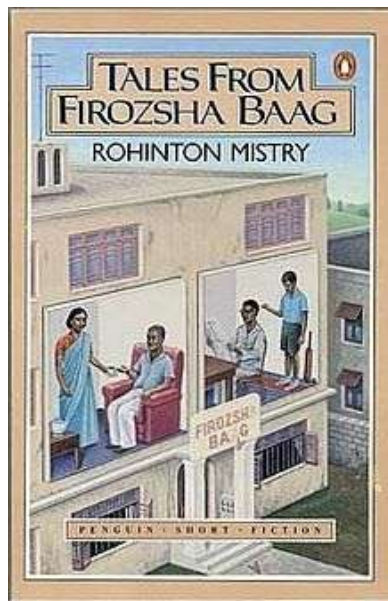
Diasporic Elements in Rohinton Mistry's *Tales from Firozsha Baag*

Rohinton Mistry is a Parsi Zoroastrian and as a person whose ancestors were forced into exile by the Islamic conquest of Iran, he was in Diaspora even in India. Like other Parsi writers, his writing is informed by this experience of double displacement as a recurrent theme in his literary works.

Rohinton's historical situation involves construction of new identity in the nation to which he has migrated and a complex relationship with the cultural history of the nation, he has left behind. He dramatizes the pangs of alienation. Yet; finally these lead to the fruits of adaption, in India and abroad for the Parsis.

Adaptation in India and expatriation in Canada are similar in function, though they are dissimilar in their levels of historicity. It is the Parsi who is the narrator in his fiction and Bombay life is seen, reflected on, and commented upon from a Parsi point of view.

Mistry, therefore, successfully evokes a sense of loss and nostalgia in the immigrant's experience and the alienation of Parsis in India.



*Tales from Firozsha Baag*

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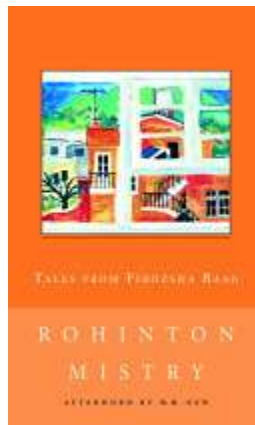
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Set in an alien setting in Canada and at home in Bombay, *Tales from Firozsha Baag* offer insights in dramatizing the Parsi world view, in relation to the levels of ‘assimilation’ and ‘westernization’. The stories, “Auspicious Occasion”, “One Sunday”, “The Ghost of Firozsha Baag”, “Condolence Visit”, “The Collectors”, “Of White Hairs and Cricket”, “The Paying Guests”, and “Exercises” focus on people and their experiences as a Parsi community which is the background for another set of stories, namely, “Squatter”, “Lend Me Your Light”, and “Swimming Lessons”. In the last set of stories, Mistry deals with the impact of expatriation on the lives of young Parsi protagonists abroad.

Since these stories deal with the writing of the immigrant experience they suggest a parallel to Rohinton Mistry, the immigrant writer who develops his themes from his past experiences in India and his immigrant experiences in Canada. Nostalgia and a mood of reminiscence mark the pages as Mistry recalls and relives his childhood and adolescent years in the Parsi ‘Baag’.



## The Themes

The themes of boyhood initiations, of everyday frustrations and of nostalgia are universal but the details are essentially Indian, indeed essentially Parsi. However, weaving in and out of their daily routine are strands that form another pattern – of Canada in India. There are references to offspring who left for foreign lands: to Sarosh, known as Sid, who migrated to Canada but returned. Jamshed, the other expatriate in the story, detests India. Kersi, Mistry’s

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alter ego, lives in a run-down apartment in Toronto and exasperates his father with his brief, non-committal letters but then sends a book of his short stories which is by inference the book under review – *Tales from Firozsha Baag*.

The book contains the following short stories:

1. Auspicious Occasion
2. One Sunday
3. The Ghost of Firozsha Baag
4. Condolence Visit
5. The Collectors
6. Of White Hairs and Cricket
7. The Paying Guests
8. Squatter
9. Lend Me Your Light
10. Exercisers
11. Swimming Lessons

### **Typical Migrants**

The protagonists in “Squatter”, “Lend Me Your Light”, and “Swimming Lessons” are typical migrants drawn to the west for its prosperity and success. If the comic tone pervades “Squatter”, the other two tales explore the psychological consequences of diaspora. For Jamshed, the protagonist in “Lend Me Your Light”, and for Kersi, the young protagonist in “Swimming Lessons”, the voyage to the West is an imperative need, a quest for prosperity. Their realization, that they are misfits in India drives them to the ‘Chosen Land’ (America or Canada). (Somalatha 2008, 113)

### **Search for Identity**

These stories set wholly or partially in Canada and display to the maximum extent the vision of the diasporic aspect. In these stories, Mistry transfers the experience from India to Canada and the diasporic trauma of belonging to a minority group (Parsi) in India as well as in

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Canada. The inhabitants of Firozsha Baag are mostly Parsis and they constitute a tiny minority in the multi-cultural country, India.

Sarosh, an Indian from the Parsi community living in Firozsha Baag, is an emigrant to Canada. As a result of this diasporic movement, the cultural spaces of two apparently diverse nations – India and Canada are brought together through the emigration.

### **Problems to Change Established Personal Habits**

Portrayal of Parsis' search for identity, the feelings of alienation, isolation and unhappiness in the foreign land find an echo in the story "Squatter".

In 'Squatter', the journey motif predominates. It represents (Sarosh) Sid's transition from a state of innocence to a state of experience. Ten years later, he calls himself 'Sid' and is totally westernized in all ways except one. Sarosh in "Squatter" is unable to solve the problem of using the Canadian washroom correctly. This story illustrates that name change signifies Sarosh's desire to become a Canadian and thus to erase the trace of his own identity in India. Throughout the story, Mistry discusses this experience of Sarosh in light-hearted manner.

Sarosh wants to change his toilet habits but his inability to use western toilet symbolizes his cultural dislocation and its social and psychological danger. In fact, it is not merely the western toilet but the xenophobia that makes his adjustment even more difficult in a foreign country. It is intensive and passionate search for self in a world divided into the "Chosen Land" and the native land. Mistry captures the dilemma of the expatriate whether to stay on in Canada or to return back to his country.

### **An Exile Forever and in All Places**

Sarosh wishes to defecate in a western style. He is ready to solve his defecating problem through a CNI (Crappus Non-Interruptus) operation. Through the doctor, he understands that the CNI operation can only help him to modify his squatting habit and it does not make any

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difference to his identity. Sarosh's attempts to give up his own identity result in alienation and displacement. Even if he uses a new name for him (Sid), his failure to defecate like a westerner prevents him from obtaining a successful identity as a Canadian. (Grace 2009, p. 53)

Sarosh's story is the story of a man who lost his identity in a new land. This story shows the love-hate association that exists between the land and the immigrants. He realizes how different he has grown, how incompatible he finds life in his native land. At the same time, he feels estranged and exiled in the adopted land. Sid's quest for home in the native land is an exercise in futility. Thus, he remains an exile both at home and abroad.

Sarosh represents those Indian immigrants, who desire to become completely Canadian, seems quite willing to forget their ethnic past, to efface their native roots and immerse themselves totally in western culture. The aim of Sarosh is assimilation and his inability to achieve that is seen as a sign of failure. He seems to be passing through a transitional phase of adjustment, which is a period of inner conflict and turmoil and through which every diaspora passes. (Goel 2001, p. 117)

### ***Lend Me Your Light - The Psyche of the Immigrant***

The story "Lend Me Your Light" considers in depth the question of the ethnic identity of immigrants and focuses on the problems encountered by the Indian diaspora and sense of displacement by contrasting the lives of the two friends – Jamshed and Kersi. Jamshed who possesses very high ambitions, dreams of a bright future and material success, abhors India and decides to migrate to America. He declares that one day he is going abroad to escape from the clutches of corruption in this country. For him Bombay is horrible, dirtier than ever. Percy Boyce leaves Bombay to work for the uplift of farmers in rural India. Percy's brother Kersi, the narrator and the protagonist of the story, who migrates to Canada, seems to bind the two extreme positions. (Roy 2001, p. 17)

Kersi is alienated from all things Indian and his fascination is with all things foreign. To him, expatriation is painful, going through complex process involving severing ties with his homeland. Though the “Chosen Land”, promises prosperity and success, his inner self remains chaotic. Kersi and Jamshed represent the typical immigrant psyche. They are caught between the two worlds – the one they have forsaken and the other which had failed them despite initial promises. Their inability to find happiness in the chosen land and the inability to discard the old world leads to tension.

Jamshed is symbolic of one side of the Indian diaspora, who do not feel alienated in an alien land. He gets completely merged in American culture and adopts its values. He thinks that the people in US and Canada do not possess the ‘ghati’ (persons who live in Western Ghats) mentality, like people in India. He believes that being an American or a Canadian is better than being an Indian. Thus, Jamshed views his native land with resentment. He seems to have forgotten his ethnic past and indigenous culture and is an example of total assimilation in the West. He fully identifies himself with the American melting pot and decries everything of the past.

### **Inescapable Two Identities**

Kersi, the protagonist, is viewed as a lost and lonely person in the midst of his new environment even among or especially among other Parsis in Toronto. Their airs and opinions sicken him; they speak condescendingly of India and Indians; they adopt the manner of rich tourists when they pay occasional visit to India. Kersi looks at his native land with enough detachment. His quest in Canada is for an identity that helps him to define himself in “Chosen Land”. Kersi feels to be in the middle of the process of adaptation. He is in conflict in choosing his identity. The consequence is that Kersi feels that he has two identities: Indian and Western.

For Kersi, Jamshed embodies this detestable attitude where, like the rest, he is almost determined to see the worst of India. Kersi’s reaction towards Jamshed is antithetical. Kersi tries hard to love India from which they have all escaped; to be determined to be homesick, thereby

convincing themselves of a sense of loyalty and patriotism that they cannot wholly feel. By romanticising the old folks at home, they felt less faceless and lost in the New World.

Kersi wonders why Jamshed's heart is full of disdain and discontentment even when he was living under different conditions now. He does not approve of Jamshed's condemnation of India and tries to retain his ethnic identity. Kersi is ambivalent in his response. He is not as forthright as Jamshed in his rejection of Bombay. Nor does he accept Bombay like Percy.

Kersi is also acutely aware of the dirt, filth, hostility, tension and corruption in his "returned" vision of Bombay. Before leaving for Toronto, Kersi suffers from an eye disease called conjunctivitis at the time of his departure to Canada. His last glance of India is through his sunglasses. He compares himself to T. S. Eliot's blind seer Tiresias. He says that he is blind and throbbing between two lives, the one in Bombay and the one to come in Toronto. (Grace 2009, 55)

This shows that Kersi does still have hope that he would be able to select the identity of the better of the countries, India or Canada. In Canada, Kersi tries to unite himself with his cultural bond and ethnic identity.

Kersi, towards the end of the story, becomes more pessimistic. He is alienated from all things Indian and his fascination is with all things foreign. This attitude of Kersi results in a deep seated guilt to him. The feelings of guilt connected with this voluntary migration are important in this story. He realises that he is guilty of the sin of hubris for seeking emigration out of the land of his birth. This reflects the failure to adapt to the new identity and to cope with the conflict of values in the Canadian diaspora.

### **Hanging between Hope and Disillusion**

Kersi hangs between hope and disillusionment. But Kersi is no second Tiresias because his blindness does not result in a new kind of vision that would enable him to predict the future. The result of his leading two lives is not a double vision but schizophrenia, that is, failure to

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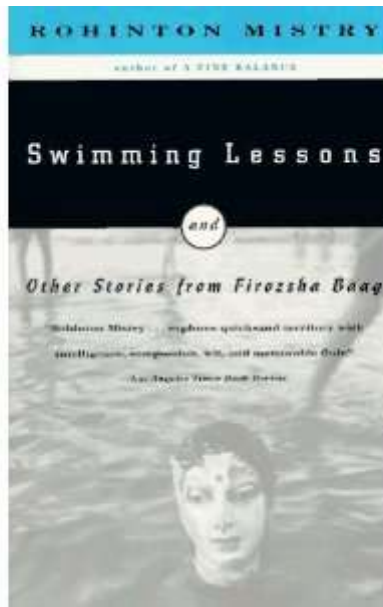
adapt to reality. So he becomes a failure not only in adapting himself to the new land but also he is blind towards his identity as an Indian. For Kersi, expatriation is a painful, though complex, process involving severing ties with his homeland. The “Chosen Land” promises prosperity and success, but his inner self remains chaotic.

### **Self-centred Immigrant Psyche**

Kersi and Jamshed represent the typical self-centred immigrant psyche. The desire to be located within an indigenous culture and work there and the gravitation pull towards the western metropolis and get assimilated in that culture provide a major creative tension in this story. They are caught between the two worlds – the one they have forsaken and the “other” into which they could not get integrated. Their inability to find happiness in the chosen land and their inability to discard the old world lead them to tension which, in fact, characterizes all expatriate writing.

### ***Swimming Lessons***

The last story in the collection, “Swimming Lessons” is yet another self-reflexive story not only in the sense of being somewhat autobiographical, but also in the context of the process of creative writing itself. The narrator in the story undertakes creative writing in order to understand both the present and the new cultures. At the outset, it appears as if the story collection is a substitute for the narrator’s weather-report like letters to his parents. It also shows how he is recreating his past and childhood through memories of his life in Firozsha Baag.



The story portrays Kersi as having taken yet another step in the process of adaptation, without losing his roots. It is the only one story which is fully set in Canada. However, even here the Canadian world is juxtaposed with Indian memories. The maximum impact of displacement and alienation is reflected in this story. It also deals with his personal identity, recollections of his homeland and his adjustment in a new ambiance. Kersi attempts to yoke the realities of existence in Bombay and Toronto and discover the true essence of human existence, which is the same everywhere, beneath superficial differences of colour, race and nationality. He tries to balance the often irreconcilable threads of self-definition, which radiate outward from his birthplace to places of residence and work, family and community. He explores the problematic of dual identity that must necessarily shift its precincts.

Though he sheds his ethnic identity in Canada, the white society is still not “home”. The protagonist in this story is an exile in the true sense of the term, since he faces rejection in the white man’s land. Here, the protagonist is not ‘the native’ but an immigrant who may be viewed negatively by the white majority.

### **Conflict between Homes**

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In this story, Kersi's focus is both on the created home and community in Canada and on the home he has left behind in India. In other words, he foregrounds the conventional image of the Eastern man in the eyes of the West. His self-image changes because he has been identified as the 'other' in the emigrated land. The vexed question of identity in the Indian diaspora is further complicated in the context of Canada.

The narrator ("I") joins a swimming class for adults in Canada because all his previous attempts to learn swimming in Bombay had failed. He has been made fun of by three young men while learning to swim. His instructor who is a moderate man tries to teach him to swim without creating any feeling of discrimination in his mind. Kersi's fear to adapt to Canada figures as a fear of water. But Kersi blames his instructor for his own failure to adapt to Canada. He translates his difficulty in learning how to swim into learning how to adjust to new surroundings.

From the very beginning, Mistry uses the present tense and focuses on the paralysed old man. The narrator is depersonalized and the nature of the people he describes can only be guessed from the manner in which he observes people – the old man, the old ladies sunbathing, Berthe, the building superintendent and her problems with her family, etc. It is an index of life lived at the margins. (Harishankar 2007,128)

### **Absence of Significant Relationships**

Kersi's life is characterized by silence and the absence of significant relationships. The only human bond he experiences is with a sick old man (the old man has been left to live alone). The Canada of the narrator's experience is a world where breaking relationships and disparate livelihoods co-exist. He feels that he is both an insider and outsider in this land, is both native and foreign and occupies the between-world position.

In contrast to all this, the author's reminiscences take him back to the Bombay of his memories, made up of the sea, the apartment block and his parents. This forms an interesting

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contrast to his present existence at the periphery, living in the apartment in Toronto. The section about his parents is particularly interesting as this forms a kind of literary subtext to the main narrative.

The narrator finds parallel between people in Firozsha Baag and Don Mills (the name of the apartment building in Canada). For example, Portuguese Woman is a re-creation of the gossipy Najamai. Similarly, old man reminds him of his own grandfather. At another level, the old man's question regarding his age reminds the narrator of Nariman's interrogation during their story sessions (Harishankar 2007, 127). The story is built around two parallels: the two buildings, the two old men (his grandfather and the paralysed old man in the building), the 'real' demanding, loving family of his childhood and the recreated family of immigrants in Canada.

"Swimming Lessons" can be read as Mistry's attempt to wend his way through the alienated experience of migration and the consequent onslaught of memories. With the new spaces created by immigration, the enforced alienation from 'normal' ties of human socializing brings the memory of what has been left behind to the fore as the new spaces of existence acquire relevance in contrast to what one knows. Hence, the paralysed old man in Canada brings to his mind the image of his grandfather suffering from palsy, who used to sit on the veranda and stared at the traffic outside Firozsha Baag or waved to anyone who passed by in the compound. The entire story oscillates between personal constructs of home and away. It seems that the protagonist is sceptical of the western culture which he has joined.

Kersi like Mistry is another diasporic writer. He becomes nostalgic and returns through his writings to Bombay, where he spent his childhood. He creates stories about his homeland on the basis of his memory and sends a copy to his parents. His parents read the stories written by him and through those stories the reader comes to know about the problems of the protagonist. The stories show his fondness for India. While in Toronto, he remembers Bombay. His parents in Bombay worry about him in Toronto because they fear that he will be alienated from his cultural roots. Through his letters he conveys that he has not forgotten India at all. On reading this story, the similarities between Mistry and Kersi is projected. The discussions between the mother and

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the father about their son's stories are like the argument between Mistry and the audience. In this story, Mistry reveals his love for Bombay (Grace 2007, p. 57).

Gradually, one sees Kersi making adjustments in a positive direction towards the land of his adoption. This is shown by his developing an increasing concern and involvement with his neighbours and also by the fact that these people around him remind him of the familiar faces back home. While Kersi is groping towards this new understanding of himself, Mistry makes us aware that there comes a gradual understanding to the immigrant that there was always a parallel in the human condition, whether it was in the sophisticated milieu of Toronto block of apartments, or in the more dilapidated old colony of Bombay.

The swimming pool and the swimming lessons provide Mistry with the opportunity to elaborate upon water as the symbol of life. Water is here the primal amniotic fluid, the medium in which Kersi is finally reborn into his new life. The failure to learn swimming in Canada is linked to his earlier inability to master the sea on the Chaupatty Beach in Bombay. These failures could symbolise the failure of Kersi, and through him most Parsis, to assimilate in either Indian or Western diaporas. However, by the end of the story, Kersi is able to open his eyes underwater in his bath tub and see life in a double perspective – Indian and Western. Water imagery is recurring in his life Chaupatty beach, swimming pool, and bathtub.

Having resolved the duality of his Indian-Canadian experience, or rather having acknowledged this quality, Kersi seems poised to write more fully of life in Canada from an Indian perspective. Kersi's father rightly points out that Canadians would be interested in reading about their country through the eyes of an immigrant, for it provided a different view-point. Despite his initial failure, the protagonist ultimately settles in the expatriate setting of Canada. He accomplishes what is still a cherished ideal for an expatriate – “rebirth” in the chosen land which would ensure him an identity. The reality is that an immigrant everywhere remains a foreigner and feels sadness in his eyes. When he looks back at the world he has left behind and despairs when he looks forward in alien and inhospitable land.

Sarosh (“Squatter”), Jamshed and Kersi (“Lend Me Your Light”) and ‘I’ narrator (“Swimming Lessons”) are characters who have direct experience of immigration. Their attempts to balance the parent and the adopted cultures result in varying degree of success. Sarosh totally fails to adapt whereas Jamshed totally immerses himself in the adopted cultures. While Kersi is ambivalent in his responses, the ‘I’ uses the stories to reconstruct and understand his own experiences.

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B. Tamilselvi, M.A., B.Ed., M.Phil.  
 Assistant Lecturer  
 Department of English  
 Standard Fireworks Rajaratnam College for Women  
 Sivakasi 626123  
 Tamilnadu  
 India  
[rajankaali2@gmail.com](mailto:rajankaali2@gmail.com)

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