

# Firozsha Baag As A Metaphor In Rohinton Mistry's Tales From Firozsha Baag

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## Abstract

Rohinton Mistry's *Tales from Firozsha Baag* represents a microcosm of Parsi community in India. Close examination of the tales illustrates the conflicts of middle class Parsi characters who try to maintain their religion, language and culture in postcolonial India. By focusing on Edna Bonacich's theory of middleman minorities this paper contends that *Firozsha Baag* is a metaphor of entanglement between colonial and postcolonial India for Parsi community. This paper aims to build upon Bonacich's contention "Middleman minorities are noteworthy for the acute hostility they have faced, including efforts to cut off their means of livelihood, riots and pogroms, exclusion movements and expulsion removal to concentration camps, and final solutions" (Bonacich, 1973, Pp.589). *Firozsha Baag* is a Parsi dominating building in Bombay which is divided into three apartments. This paper contends that as the outer look of the building of *Firozsha Baag* is shabby and scruffy so is the case with the lives of its residents who are considered a migrant community and they being immigrant are facing discrimination in the east and alienation in the west.

**Key words:** Alienation; discrimination; entanglement; post-colonialism; metaphor-analysis

## Introduction

In Rohinton's Mistry's *Tales from Firozsha Baag* Parsi community in India is the diverse focus of attention. The stories mainly are about the conflicts of middle class Parsi families who in the wake of India's independence are in the continuous process of preserving their religion, language and culture. Keith Garebian says that *Tales from Firozsha Baag* is "the first significant collection of short fiction that expresses the Parsi sensibility" (Garebian, 1989, Pp.25). *Firozsha Baag* is a Parsi dwelling in Bombay which is divided into three apartments

with its leaky toilets and crumbling plasters walls. Its outer look is as shabby and scruffy as the lives of its residents who are facing subtle discrimination in the east and alienation in the west.

### **Literature Review**

Firozsha baag serves as a metaphor to show this entanglement of Parsi Community between colonial and postcolonial India. Firozsha Baag is not only a concrete building, rather it transcends its spatial constructs as Thrift argues “Space is not a commonplace external background to human and social action” (Thrift, 2003, Pp.97). So Firozsha Baag is not only a building made of bricks and cement but also it serves as a witness of Parsi grandeur under British Raj and an observer of distorted identities in the wake of independent India. Mistry presented the plight of Parsi community who have lost their identities and are striving for the preservation of their culture and religion in post partitioned India.

Historically, Parsi is an ancient religion. It originated in Persia (Modern day Iran). as Mary Boyce says “They are descendants of the Zoroastrians who left an Islamicized Persia in the tenth century A.D” (Boyce, 2001, Pp.152). Parsis migrated from Iran to the borders of India. Firstly they settled in Gujrat “In the year 936, a group of Zoroastrians sailed to Gujarat and founded what would become India's Parsi community” (Green, 2000, Pp.115). Afterwards they moved towards Bombay in the era of British Raj. According to Paul Axelrod “The Parsis, a community of 85,000 Zoroastrians who reside mainly in Bombay” (Axelrod, 1990, Pp.402). It was British who motivated Parsi to move towards Bombay which had more opportunities of work and more chances of prosperity for them. Luhrmann aptly puts it “The British encouraged the Parsis to move to Bombay by giving them land, and their casteless status may have enabled them to move more freely than other groups and to interact more freely with the British” (Luhrmann, 1994, Pp.336). This motivation of British formed an emotional tie between Parsi and British and hence speculated a notion of nostalgia of their golden era under British rule, in the wake of partition of subcontinent.

As British were the patronizing Parsis so they were influenced by the lifestyle of British and tried to imitate them not in their attire but in their mannerism. Paul Axelrod surveyed the cultural life of Parsis who are living in Bombay. His finding says that the Parsis “adopted the features of Western culture. While Parsis vigorously retained their religion and distinctive form of dress, they embraced western behavior and values in other domains” (Axelrod, 1990, Pp.408). British were the ideals for Parsis. They adopted “masculinized British ideals” but because of the political upheaval in the subcontinent, Parsis lost their eminence and experiences “crisis of identity” (Luhrmann, 1994, Pp.334).

Before the arrival of the British Raj being immigrant, Parsis were looked down upon. They were not only marginalized but also were deprived of their rights. “The Parsis were on the periphery of Indian society prior to the arrival of the British, then becoming significant intermediaries between the western rulers and the Indians” (Writer, 1989, Pp.131). But with the arrival of British, their days turned. Parsis prospered under the British Raj. Karaka points it out in these words “With the advent of British power in India better and brighter days dawned for the Parsis. With the rise of that power they have risen from poverty and oppression to

security and wealth” (Karaka, 1884, Pp.295). So after partition of 1947 Parsi community was also left asunder across the newly carved borders of Indian and Pakistan.

After the traumatic phase of post partition of India and Pakistan their scale was turned upside down as Pithawalla mentions their condition in the twentieth century:

Today the scale appears to turn the other way. The Parsis themselves are getting poorer day by day. They do not seem to stand the strain of racial competition, physical exertion and moral bankruptcy. One can but wholeheartedly wish that the Parsis possessed the Iranian glory even in a foreign land. Nothing but degeneration and demoralization appears to have set in among them.

(Pithawalla, 1932, Pp. 19)

In the domain of Parsi literature a common thematic strand is the past glory of Parsis as Tanya Luhrmann says “Literature celebrates a theme that has run through Parsi writing on Parsis since Independence became inevitable: that we are not what we were, we have fallen from the top” (Luhrmann, 1994, Pp.343). Bapsi Sidwah refers to the incident of migrant Parsis of Iran who arrived on the shore of India in her novel *Ice-Candy Man* “Do you think it was easy to be accepted into a new country? No! he booms. ‘Our forefathers were not given permission even to disembark” (Sidwah, 1989, Pp.39). She further describes the message which was sent by the Indian Prince “Our forefathers and foremothers waited for four days, not knowing what was to become of them. Then at last, the Grand Vazir appeared on deck with a glass of milk filled to the brim [...] you are not welcome. My land is full and prosperous and we don’t want outsiders with a different religion and alien ways to disturb the harmony” (Sidwah, 1989, Pp.39).

After the partition of India Parsi are striving for their individuality. For this quest of identity they try to preserve their language religion and culture. Their religion was the ground on which Parsis migrated from Iran as Rashna Writer says “The safeguarding of the Zoroastrian religion by these Iranian migrants was the motivating factor in their initial departure from Iran. The religious dimension of their life may thus be assumed to have been the principal ingredient in the development of a community persona” (Writer, 1989, Pp.129). Their religion is one of their defining parameter. “The Parsis define themselves today by two parameters: Zoroastrian religion and Parsi ethnicity” (Ganesh, 2008, Pp.320). It seems that Parsis chose India as their sojourn not only from the fear of persecution at the hands of Muslims but also where they could preserve their culture and religion, and from all perspectives it was a typical symptom of the psychology of a minority.

### **Methodology**

This qualitative research encompasses a systematic division. The whole research is divided in five parts which are introduction, literature review, research methodology, data analysis and conclusion respectively. The tools for the research are both print and web sources and the analysis is done in the light of previous studies on the topic as well as in the light of primary text *Tales from Firozsha Baag* by Rohinton Mistry. This research aims to build upon Edna Bonacich’s theory of middleman minorities. This research contends that *Firozsha Baag* is a

metaphor of entanglement between colonial and postcolonial India for Parsi community. This paper aims to build upon Bonacich's contention "Middleman minorities are noteworthy for the acute hostility they have faced, including efforts to cut off their means of livelihood, riots and pogroms, exclusion movements and expulsion removal to concentration camps, and final solutions" (Bonacich, 1973, Pp.589). This paper argues that the Parsi community of Firozsha Baag is considered a migrant community in India and hence are victimized by the majority. They are not gel in with Indians and face discrimination on this basis. For their survival, Parsi are trying to preserve their religion and culture. In doing so they are maintaining their lost identity.

### **Discussion**

Firozsha Baag is a metaphor of entanglement of Parsis. Mistry has given a distorted picture of postcolonial India where toilets are leaky and plaster of wall crumbles. Rustomji says "That stinking lavatory upstairs is leaking again [...] plaster from the ceiling had dripped into it" (Mistry, 1987, Pp.6). Bachelard discusses the notion of inhabited space in his book *The Poetics of Space*. He says "A house that has been experienced is not an inert box. Inhabited space transcends geometrical space" (Bachelard, 1994, Pp.47). So Mistry hints at the postcolonial congestion of the corporeal space. He says that the building of Firozsha Baag has been made up of cheap materials:

The story went that these flats had been erected in an incredibly short time and with very little money. Cheap materials had been used, and sand carted from nearby Chaupatty beach had been mixed in abundance with substandard cement. Now during the monsoon season beads of moisture trickled down the walls, like sweat down a coolie's back, which considerably hastened the crumbling of paint and plaster.

(Mistry, 1987, Pp.18)

This description is metaphoric of Parsis life in the post partition phase of India where Parsis are victim of discrimination. The peeling plaster of the wall is representative of the flaking identity of Parsi community. The WC at the fire temple is in disgusted condition "the WC there was horrid, with urine usually spattered outside the toilet bowl or excrement not flushed away. To look at it, it was not Parsis who used the WC, he felt, but uneducated, filthy, ignorant barbarians" (Pp.18). This comment is a general view of Indians for the Parsis in the postcolonial India. The fire temple is a significant religious space for Parsis. The disrupted disorder of the surrounding of the fire temple represents the condition of religious identity of Parsi. The filthy representation of WC and the word "barbarians" is crucial to the discussion of postcolonial discourse.

Firozsha Baag is a crumbling building which not have scruffy exterior but also there are no facilities inside the building. Another problem Parsi community is facing is the shortage of gas and water. Rustomji says "He wondered if there was going to be another shortage, like last year, when they had had to burn coals in a sigri" (Pp.7).Jehangir complains about the hardships of city life. One amongst them is the shortage of water. "The quota of tap water had been curtailed, and Jehangir had been waking up at five A.M. for the past month to help Mother fill

up storage drums for bathing and cleaning and cooking, before the supply was cut off at six A.M” (Pp.245). Train stations are full of broken taps “the copious drip splashing in complex, agitated rhymes upon the stone floor” (Pp.255). This picture could be taken as a parameter to see India after the departure of British. Rohinton Mistry’s represents the Parsi race in the contemporary context of postcolonial era where they are entangled between the old order: colonial India and the new order: postcolonial India. The privileges which they used to enjoy in the colonial India are limited now. In the colonial India “they thought they were like British only, ruling India side by side” (Pp.53) Barta says that “English culture seems to have permeated the Parsi lifestyle to a great extent” (Batra, 2011, Pp.119) as we see Tehmina takes her evening scotch and soda and the Boyce family keeps its beef divided in seven packets in Najamai’s refrigerator. Both examples are of British lifestyle. Like the colonizers, there is infatuation in them for the white color “Parsis prefer Manglorean Catholics, they have light skin colour. For themselves also Parsis like light skin, and when Parsi baby is born that is the first and most important thing. If it is fair they say, O how nice light skin just like parents. But if it is dark skin they say, arré what is this ayah no chhokro, ayah’s child” (Mistry, 1987, Pp.52). By the departure of British, Parsi community is affected the most. They are not able to identify themselves with post partitioned Indians; whom the saw as uncivilized and barbaric. Hence they feel nostalgic about the colonial times as Rustomji is grieved on the British departure because he can no longer enjoy Johnnie Walker Scotch which was freely available under the British but could now “only be obtained only in the black market” (Pp.18). Parsi once migrated from Persia in search of a new home. Having found their home in Bombay under British Raj they were satisfied but the political shift in the subcontinent fractured their identity. They have become middle man minorities who are strangers to themselves. Hence they again migrate for a new home and become immigrant.

Instead of finding a home immigrant Parsi found alienation in the west. Kersi compares the condition of India and Canada when he says “This is not Bombay, an ambulance would have arrived” (Pp.291). He further compares Chaupatty beach with the swimming pool “The swimming pool like Chaupatty beach, has produced a still birth. But there is a difference. Water means regeneration only if it is pure and cleansing. Chaupattay was filthy, the pool was not” (Pp.289). But the tragedy is he couldn’t swim neither in Chaupattay beach which is representative of the East nor in the clean pool which is Symbolic of the West because he knows he has been labelled with an unwanted Indian identity. When he missed out his swimming course out of the fear of water and also out of the fear of being an immigrant as he says to himself “this instructor is an irresponsible person. Or he does not value the lives of non-white immigrants. I remember the three teenagers. Maybe the swimming pool is the hangout of some racist group, bent on eliminating all non-white swimmers, to keep their waters pure and their white sisters unogled” (Pp.288) he knows he represents India as he says “they might now be saying that India is a nation of non-swimmers” (Pp.293). All these instances show the trauma of carrying an unwanted identity.

Mistry also provides the account of physical troubles of immigrant Parsis. For instance in “Squatter” Hansotia tells about Sarosh, a Parsi, who is unable to use western commode. “Sarosh had been living in Toronto for ten years. We find him depressed and miserable,

perched on top of the toilet, crouching on his haunches, feet planted firmly for balance upon the white plastic oval of the toilet seat” (Pp.185). Sarosh identifies himself as an Indian squatter on Canadian ground. Even his Canadian citizenship is not a help for him. “Every morning of his life in the new country suffocated him” (Pp.186). At this moment he realizes that there is no happiness for the immigrants, the real warmth of life is to be in the family. Sarosh feel alienated as he is not capable to adjust himself in the new environment. Sarosh feels alienated for being an immigrant but Kersi faces discrimination for being Parsi. When he goes to Tar Gully with his bat on the shoulder to find Francis, he has been harassed by various comments “Some of these men now hooted at Kersi and Percy. “Parsi bawaji! Cricket at night? Parsi bawaji! What will you hit, boundary or sixer?” (Pp.41). Dhunjisha’s murder is another example of violence that Parsis are facing in postcolonial India. Bonacich says “Middleman minorities are strangers. They keep themselves apart from the societies in which they dwell, engage in liquidable occupations, are thrifty and organized economically. Hence, they come into conflict with the surrounding society” (Bonacich, 1973, Pp.593). So, Mistry provides critique to dominant ethnic majority and claims for the rights of middle man minorities who are unable to find their identities.

In this quest of identity and belonging, Parsi try to maintain their religion, language and culture. Mistry provides a detail of various religious and cultural festivals of Parsi in his tale. For instance, the first tale in the collection is “Auspicious Occasions” which presents the religious ritual and customs of Parsi community. The story opens on the morning of “Behram Roje” which is a religious event of Parsis. Another religious event that has been describe in the story is of navjote, the ritual through which an individual is inducted into the Zoroastrian religion “The ceremony in which young people are initiated into Zoroastrianism is known as navjote” (Hartz, 2009, Pp.111). In “condolence visit” burial ritual such as “Dusmoo Prayers” and “massiso” has been described (Mistry, 1987, Pp.69). Moreover rituals of widowhood has been explicated in detail. Najamai, who is considered to be an authority on the “subject of religious rituals and The Widowed Women” (Pp.73) tells Daulat, widow of Minocher Mirza, to turn off the lamp which is burning besides Minocher’s bed.

Within this religious consciousness, one major problem that Parsis face is of generation gap, because those who have been educated in foreign or catholic schools have somehow left their roots as Mehroo observed that in her childhood on the ritual of chasni every one observed the ceremony“all the brothers and sisters wearing their prayer caps would eagerly sit around the dining-table to partake of the fruit and sweets blessed during the day’s prayer ceremonies” (Pp.14). But “her own children, who did not give a second thought to these things; she had to coax them to finish the chasni or it would sit for days, unnoticed and untouched” (Pp.14). Sarosh-sid, a Canadian immigrant, refuses to wear pugree which is a traditional outerwear of Parsi wedding“For the wedding, Minocher had wanted Sarosh to wear the pugree, but he had insisted (like the modern young man that he was) on an English styled double-breasted suit. So Minocher had worn it instead. Pugree-making had become a lost art due to modern young men like Sarosh” (Pp.80). Jehangir’s mother says to him “You never talk to us these days,” said Mother. “You were not like that in school. How you used to come home and tell me everything. The little butter we could afford I would always save for you, make your tea, help

with homework” (Pp.257). Even in “Swimming lessons” Kersi’s father makes her wife write a reply to kersi’s letter which is overtly religious “remind him he is a Zoroastrian: manashni, gavashni, kunashni, better write the translation also: good thoughts, good words, good deeds – he must have forgotten what it means, and tell him to say prayers and do kusti at least twice a day” (Pp.284). For the new generation values are not important because they are product of dismantled identities which is the result of the event of partition of the subcontinent.

### **Conclusion**

By considering the deformed building of Firozsha baag as a metaphor, it is concluded that Mistry has represented the account of middle class Parsis who are entangled between colonial and postcolonial India. To reconstruct their identity they try to preserve their religion, culture and language in an environment where being immigrant they face discrimination in the east and alienation in the west. Moreover, the perilous effects of discrimination and alienation are rooted deep down in Parsi consciousness that the new generation cannot go back to their cultural and religious roots and hence are entangled in this situation.

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