

Decaying Parsi Values in Rohinton Mistry's Tales from Firozsha Baag

Abstract

Mistry projects the internal strife of characters individually as well as collectively. Mistry through the experiences of his characters shows the declining moral and ethical values age old culture and traditions of Zoroastrianism and emphasizes their preference towards growing materialism. He is well aware about the facts that their existence is going towards extinction and the declining moral and ethical values and diminishing population is an alarming bell for the survival of their identity and ethnicity. Mistry presents the social realism in his stories and has a special regard for Parsi culture and tradition in this ever changing world where moral and ethical values are decaying due to scientific advancement and growing materialism.

Keywords: Parsi, Culture, Tradition, Firozsha Baag, Decaying Moral Values

Introduction

He assembled the aged priests and put questions to them concerning the kings who had once possessed the world. 'How did they', he enquired, 'hold the world in the beginning, and why is it that it has been left to us in such a sorry state? And how was it that they were able to live free of care during the days of their heroic?'

-Firdausi, Shah-Nama

The Parsis, the members of an ethno- religious minority community, have been living in India and Pakistan since their dispersal from their native place Iran in 639 AD. They have always been in the leading position in the field of banking, industry, science and technology, freedom movement, political and modern literary movement. But they started the pondering over the ethno-religious issues in their literary creations since last two or three decades .The sense of ambivalence and alienation can be noticed easily in the works of second generation Parsi writers Bapsi Sidhwa, Rohinton Mistry, Firdausi Kanga, and Farrukh Dhondy et al. Indo-Canadian Parsi writer Rohinton Mistry, who was born in 1952 in Bombay and migrated to Canada in 1975, writes to preserve the Parsi culture and Parsi values. His debut literary work, Tales from Firozsha Baag(1987) focuses on the position of age old culture and traditions along with the identity crisis of Parsi Zoroastrians .Craig Tapping comments on this anthology, "...an exemplary postmodern, postcolonial literary collection. It stages the translation of oral cultures into literature with a commentary on the traditional society" (Morey 67). It seems mirror which reflects the changing attitude, habits and thinking of Parsis residing in India and abroad. He projects the internal strife of characters individually as well as collectively. When Mistry is alleged to write only about Parsi people and Parsi environment then he justifies his writings saying, "I must write about what I know best .In that way, I automatically speak for my tribe" (Hancock 145). No doubt, true to his assertions his stories are presentation of Parsi characters, their dreams, ambitions and fears which are as accessible to the western readers as well as the Indian readers having universal appeal. As Mistry claims in his interview with Geoff Hancock, 'I suppose the world is my audience'.

His writings open a window to Parsi culture and their ways of living at the very crucial juncture of time when this pre-Islamic ethno religious community is going towards extinction. Culture is a comprehensive term and highlights the internal as well as external characteristics of any society as E.B.Tylor, an anthropologist defines, "Culture or civilization, taken in its wide ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, beliefs, art, morals, law, customs and any other capabilities and habit acquired by man as a

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member of society”(Tylor 1). Mistry through the experiences of his characters shows the declining moral and ethical values age old culture and traditions of Zoroastrianism and emphasizes their preference towards growing materialism. He is well aware about the facts that their existence is going towards extinction and the declining moral and ethical values and diminishing population is an alarming bell for the survival of their identity and ethnicity. He has expressed his concern over these challenges in an interview with Dirk Bennet, “There are only 120000 Parsees in the world. So it is not a threat or delusion that they are on the verge of disappearance. What is 60,000 in a city [Bombay] of 12 million? And it is a pity when anything disappears from this world, any species, man, animal or insect” (Bharucha 43). He has a committed agenda to preserve Parsi culture, traditions, customs and rituals through his literature for the coming generation. The author on the basis of his childhood memories and believing the core philosophy of Zoroastrianism gives the full details of Parsi customs and rituals as an insider of Parsi community. He admits in an interview with Lambert Angela, “I’m not a practicing Parsi but the ceremonies are quite beautiful. As a child I observed [them] carefully in the same way as I did my homework, but it had no profound meaning for me Zoroastrianism is opposition of good and evil. For the triumph of good, we have to make a choice” (Lambert 7).

The title of the first story ‘Auspicious Occasion’, itself indicates a lot of cultural fragrance and religious discourse and ethnic fixity, customs and rituals, their sartorial tastes, food habits and identity crisis among Parsi-Zoroastrians. The story begins with the portrayal of a Parsi couple Rustomji and his wife Mehroo. The bliss of marriage life is shown through this couple in Parsi family whether having the difference in their opinion and age both lead a happy life. It shows the strength of Indian family system as well as the strength of Parsi family institution. But the circumstances have been changed now and it has become the community having the highest divorce rate in Indian society along with top literacy rate and urbanization. The story explores the status of women in Parsi society through the female character Mehroo who belongs to an orthodox Parsi family where she observes “...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 the month” (3-4). The storyteller makes very pertinent observations about an orthodox Parsi family where on the name of purity the women have to keep themselves apart from the family during the menstrual period. But Rustomji allows her (Mehroo) to follow all the orthodox customs of her parent’s family except the separate room for unclean days. The story at one level shows the difference between orthodox Parsi family and modern educated Parsi family. Rustomji who represents the educated Parsis has no true faith in Parsi culture and religion and he blames Dastur ji as a hypocrite who loves to touch and feel women and drive more pleasure in hugging and squeezing the younger and

fleshier women. It is not enough he also alleges him for exchanging lewd remarks between lines of prayer.

-Ashem Vahoo

See the tits on that chickie-boo (14).

The author also focuses on the changing attitude and mentality of the Parsis. Rustomji frankly expresses his opinion, “...that this was no country for sorrow or compassion or pity – these were worthless and, at best, inappropriate”(8). The murder of Dasturji by Chasniwala an employee of the fire temple reflects the degradation in the moral and ethical values. The behaviour and changing attitude of the Parsis may be encapsulated used by Tania Lührman “The Good Parsis: We are not What We Were”(Lührman 126).

“One Sunday” his next story highlights the social and financial conditions of Parsis in India and foregrounds the theme of alienation and unbelongingness in the contemporary circumstances. It expresses Parsi mannerism and mutual cooperation among Parsis along with the changing attitude of youths towards their parents and western inclination. The Parsis are considered marginalized in Indian society although the story very analytically that the situation of marginalization changes according to circumstances and relative positions and the story depicts some people who are more marginalized than Parsis. Francis who is a Christian as the name suggests but his sole is to provide services to the inhabitants of Firozsha Baag. It is aptly suggested that professions are not based on religion only but financial status plays a very important role in society.

“The Ghost of Firozsha Baag” is a multidimensional story that may be read at various levels. It is a commentary on Parsi culture and social traditions by a non-Parsi narrator, Jacqueline the ayha. The narrator of the story, Jaakaylee as her name mispronounced in the story narrates each and every incident in detail about the Parsi family where she has been working as ayha for moreover fifty years. She is a catholic Christian who is whole heartedly devoted to her religion but makes her observations about Parsi Zoroastrianism with objectivity and psychological detachment. She tells about the life of Parsis as insider as well as outsider in the Parsi family. The treatment of supernatural elements and superstitions among the Parsis is the major content of the story. Here, Mistry also deals with the theme of displacement within the country in search of employment through the ayha. The story elaborates that the Parsis are the sincere followers of their own religion at the same time they give due respect the other religions also. She reveals the superiority complex and racial discrimination prevalent among Parsis, “...But if it is dark skin they say, are what is this ayah no chhokro, ayah’s child” (46). It highlights the religious tolerance, secularism and cultural pluralism along with sense of superiority and racism among the Parsis.

His story “Condolence Visit” deals with that how the Parsis feel over-burdened with some meaningless and hollow customs and rituals of Parsi Zoroastrianism. The age old Parsi traditions and rituals and their impact on human psyche are depicted minutely which reflect that how painful is to tolerate

the burden of such shallow and meaningless customs in the story. The word condolence in itself symbolizes the solace and peace for the family members of demised, but here ironically it enhances the pain when people come dispassionately and Daulat, wife of the expired person Minocher Mirza has to repeat the details of his illness and that increases his sorrow instead of reduce it. The cassette recorder here becomes the powerful symbol of modern man who shows that condolences only for the sake of formalities and social trend. Najamai, who thinks herself an authority on widowhood matters, objects when Daulat do not put off the lamp because it gives solace to her but should be blown up according to Parsi traditions, again suggests the futility of customs. Minocher Mirza's *pugree* becomes the powerful symbol of Parsi cultural heritage because the Parsis used to wear *pugree* on the important occasion particularly on marriage. When Daulat decides to give it to a Parsi youngman after the day of Dushmoo, then Najamai and Moti oppose it saying that it will disturb Minocher's soul.

"The Collectors" presents the ironical view of life, Dr. Mody who gets the respect of whole community and has the reputation of a thorough gentleman and true Parsi has to face humiliation due to his son Pesi. His son was so notorious and insensitive towards good manners and noble behaviour totally opposite to his father. Dr. Mody named him on the name on 'Peshotan, in the Persian epic, *Shah-Nameh*' who was a great lover of art and noble general and a man of wise counsel. It also emphasizes that expectations sometimes prove so tragic and futile as Pesi grows up. Dr. Mody expects that his son "Would play the violin, acquire the best from the cultures of East and West, thrill to words of Tagore and Shakespeare, appreciate Mozart and Indian ragas; and one day, at the proper moment, he would introduce him to his dearest, activity, stamp-collecting"(82), but in vain. The stamps become the very important symbol of faith during the story which ultimately turns into a heap of wastage. "It was doubtful of anything of value remained in trunk" (103). The another incident, when Mrs. Bulsara observes that her son is not paying proper attention towards the stamp collection handed over to him by Mrs. Modi "Do something Jehangoo, do something with them"(102). The boy does not show any interest in this matter again because she was well aware about the adolescent psychology. "... Jehangoo was at that difficult age... where boys automatically did the exact reverse of what their parents said" (107).

"Of White Hairs and Cricket" is an interesting story, narrated by a fourteen years old boy, Kersi Boyce who is the narrator of many other stories also. It deals with the life from the eyes of a teenager who is an insider in the Firozsha Baag. It is the representation of middle class family life in Metropolitan city like Bombay and contains the bond of family love and attachment in Indian society particularly in Parsi community. The title of the story is very apt and suggestive and symbolizes health and joviality of life through white hairs and cricket. The game of cricket which is introduced by the Britisher

and now has become the most popular game of the country is the most favourite game of Parsis from the older days. The white hairs reflect maturity along with growing age so undesired that these are called "the sign posts of mortality" (107). The story presents the harsh realities of life with the powerful symbols and images in this competitive world. He wishes that his son would achieve everything that could not be enjoyed by him. The bright future or dream job thought by a father for his son as revealed in the story is to be immigrated to western countries as Mr Boyce says, "...you must go too, to America. No future here"(112), such kind of feelings show that how much he was fed up with the corruption, unemployment, adulteration and black marketing prevalent in India.

The narrator boy makes a pertinent comment upon the way of Parsi worship and how the people are losing interest in regular visits to fire temple, "...there was not a blazing fire because hardly any sandalwood offerings had been left in the silver *thaali* most people came only at the holy days"(113).

"The Paying Guest" is an interesting story deals with the theme of alienation, unbelongingness and growing insensitivity in the society. Kashmira, wife of Boman and sister of Rustomji as a daughter and wife, was expected to follow the set principles in the patriarchal society of India. In this way, kashmira represent the whole class of such women who have caliber and zeal to do something creative for the welfare of the society but cause of some prejudices and biased approach of all her talent goes futile. The another incident that explores the self-centered and selfish nature of modern men reveals when Boman needs an evidence in his favour to evict his flat. But it is shocking that nobody comes forward to cooperate him even his most faithful Chartered Accountant defies him hypocritically, "... I never transgress: three monkeys principle..."(137).Which reflects the deconstructive approach towards Gandhian philosophy. The maltreatment of the immigrated son of the paying guest couple highlights the sense of unbelongingness prevalent in the modern generation. The story exposes the true nature of people who don't want to involve in others sufferings and grievances the ethnic sensibility and arousal of wee consciousness of the minority community is pointed out in the story.

The story "Exerciser" reflects very important aspect that Parsis have started to transgress their boundaries of religion under the influences of dominant religion as the prevalent customs of latter have leaked into Parsi way of life. It reveals a lot of information about the Parsi culture and social traditions and graphically depicts how these moral, social and ethical values are decaying in post modern world. The author concentrates upon parents and children relationship in the present story. When Jehangir returns home his mother examines him with suspicious and skillful questions and observes his face and dress. He overreacted, "Behroze never puts on make up when we got kissie-koatie"(217). Jehangir docile and shy natured boy in the early stories; but now he reacts in very rude manners. Mrs. Bulsara said, "When a son speaks so shamelessly to his

mother it is end”(217). The above mentioned incident suggests that such kind of behaviour in the Parsi families couldn't be expected on the part of children by the parents. It is well known facts that inter religion marriages are prohibited in the Parsis but story unveils the narrow mindedness of Parsi parents when they feel too insecure to select a Parsi girl of the son's choice. It was not in the case of boy only; the girl's parents were very fussy about their relationship. When they think that break-up between boy and girl has been taken place only then they leave her alone at home as Behroze tells, "...my parents think we've broken up, and they didn't need to stick around to guard my virginity”(220). The age old association with Hindus has brought the Parsis close to them and they have started to follow their way of living and thinking also. Now they have no full faith in Dada Ormuzd but Bhagwan Baba and think him as the benefactor of their family. It also exposes the hollowness of mutual relationship and the age old loyalty has begun to shaken which is a bad omen for community as Eckchard Kulke comment upon the importance of religious exclusivity and cultural pluralism, "...feeling of religious exclusivity necessary for the existence and the survival of the community”(Kulke 15).

"Squatter" is one of three stories having the Canadian setting written in metafictional technique. It deals with experiences of Parsi immigrants to the western countries and represents the cultural conflicts of the Parsi immigrants and depicts that how odd situations they have to face in their adopted dreamland. They think that they are going in Utopian world but when they face the hard realities of alien land then they understand the actual position and feel strange in their new culture. The story is told in 'Orature tradition of East' which is further exploited by the author in his first novel. No doubt, the Parsis have enjoyed the elite status in company Raj but now the situation has changed in post independent India. They have become marginalized in a country where democracy is influenced by vote bank politics. They started to immigrate to the western countries which are generally considered the dreamlands. The Parsis have adopted Indian culture and tradition to the core of their heart and now if they immigrate they have to face many cultural difference and hardship. The situation of the Parsis is very complex as they are having double diasporic consciousness. The attitude of the Multicultural Department of Canada reveals the reality of foreign life. He tries to find out "old pattern" of life but all his efforts prove futile. He wished now to be called Sarosh not 'Sid' because when he hears this name Sid, he recalls his difficult and odd days. Sarosh and Sid two names of the same person reflect his identity crisis in between the two worlds but none of them is whole one. The story unveils that the Parsis feel at ease in India and it has become their cultural haven. Here, they find their cultural roots along with their odd situation and the most suitable centre for their cultural preservation.

The story "Lend Me Your Light" suggests Indian and Canadian experiences from his childhood days up to his immigration and his life in Canada now. But Nariman alerts him, "Well, lead a good life, do

nothing to bring shame to you or the Parsi community" (179), which clearly highlights that Parsism haunts how much in the mind of Parsi people that they wish to keep it unstained in every situation. Not only in this story, but in "Squatter" also Nariman has exposed the situation of immigrated Parsis. He makes a comment that success and happiness has no relation. Happiness is matter of contentment not achievement and immigration may be an achievement in the view of some people but no guarantee of happy life. Kersi belongs to this third category and recalls each and everything about his childhood and native place. He recalls everything before he left India especially the last night. He recalls, "...I slept on my last night in Bombay a searing pain in my eyes woke me up. It was one O'clock. I bathed my eyes and tried to get back to sleep. Half-jokingly, I saw myself as someone out of a Greek tragedy, guilty of the sin of hubris for seeking emigration out of the land of my birth, and paying the price in burnt-out eyes: I, Tiresias, blind and throbbing between two lives, the one in Bombay and the one to come in Toronto..."(179-180) The position of Kersi's heart and mind is depicted through his thoughts when he compares himself with "Tiresias" a hero of Greek tragedy. The ambivalence of Parsi identity is revealed in the words of German poet Zafer Senocak:

I carry two worlds within me
But neither one whole (Roy 19),

In this way the protagonist tries to search happiness in an alien land like his land of birth. Rushdie "It may be that writers in my position, exiles or emigrants ...Imaginary homelands, India of the mind"(Rushdie 10).

"Swimming Lessons" reflects the deep impact of immigration and nostalgia on the psyche of protagonist of the story. The reaction of Kersi's parents show the "self-reflexive" element in the story. The incident related to 'swimming classes' shows the class and racial discrimination internationally. Here, Mistry widens the arc of his diasporic experience as a Parsi in Canada. He focuses upon the situation of Parsis in Canada where they are taken as a part of Asian race. It deals with the question of identity in the 'mosaic' of multiculturalism in India. It is notable that discrimination against Kersi in Canada is not as a member of small community or member of Parsi Diaspora but of the large Asian presence. Along with the diasporic consciousness, it also highlights the cultural attachment and longing for tradition in an alien land where he feels himself a complete stranger. The Parsi reader expects that their faith should be recognized, "...Parsis...were the decedents of Cyrus the great and the magnificent Persian Empire..."(245). The Parsis have strong patriotic feeling and ethnic bonds in their blood and behaviour. They have rich cultural and historical roots which are being preserved by them after the many hundred years also.

Aim of the Study

The aim of the study is to highlight paradigm shift in moral and ethical values. The researcher points out that how a community with high culture values is going towards extension. An anthology of

these eleven stories mirrors to day to day life of parsi culture.

Conclusion

Thus, Mistry presents the social realism in his stories and has a special regard for Parsi culture and tradition in this ever changing world where moral and ethical values are decaying due to scientific advancement and growing materialism. The anthology not only deals with the age old culture and tradition but also emphasizes the modern trends in Parsi community such as their preference for immigrations; ambivalent attitude towards India, their opinion about majority community of India and core philosophy of Parsi-Zoroastrianism *manashni*, *gavashni*, and *kunashni* means good thought, good words, and good deeds respectively in this era of globalization. Lührman, "The central cosmological struggle of good against evil is described as an effort to achieve purity – that which is evil is impure, that which is impure is evil...transformation took place with the concept of purity ...which was refigured from holiness to racial superiority"(Lührman 101).

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