

## **Ethnic conflict and the Fate of Parsis in India: a Study of Rohinton Mistry's Tales from Firozshah Bag**

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**Abstract:** *Rohinton Mistry is an Indian born Parsi writer settled in Canada. He writes about the ethnic conflict that his community faces from the right wing political parties in Bombay like the Shiv Sena. His short story collection titled Tales from Firozshah Bag describes the Bombay city of the 1960s and 70s from a Parsi perspective detailing the present condition of the Parsis and their loss of social, economic and political significance. The short stories in the collection also present the issue of ethnic conflict that the community had to face from the neighbouring communities that call themselves 'sons of the soil'. This article aims to analyse the issue of ethnic conflict faced by the Parsi community in the post-independence period with reference to Mistry's first collection of short stories titled Tales from Firozshah Bag.*

**Keywords-** *Ethnic Conflict, Rohinton Mistry, Parsi Literature, Tales from Firozshah Bag.*

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### **I. Introduction**

This paper undertakes to interrogate the conflicts the Parsi community had to face in the post independence period with special reference to the collection of short stories titled Tales From Firozshah Baag. Mistry was born in Bombay in 1952 and migrated to Canada in 1975, as he recollects in an interview with Adil Jussawalla, to become famous in the music world (Bharucha 73). He is a representative of the young Parsis of post independence period who have migrated to the richer countries in search of better opportunities. This generation of Parsis are dissatisfied with the country of their birth and their illustrious ancestry and surely feel that they are marginalised by the majoritarian politics of the post colonial period. In all his four major works which includes his collection of short stories titled Tales From Firozsha Baag (1987), and three novels, Such a Long Journey (1991), A Fine Balance (1996) and Family Matters (2002) Mistry powerfully voices the systematic and naked oppression of his miniscule community by the majority communities both at the national level and at the regional level- especially in Bombay where the majority of the Parsis live. There is a direct engagement with the policies of regional parties like Shiv Sena and national parties like Indian National Congress in his novels in terms of the treatment of minority communities in general and the Parsis in particular by these parties. He criticises the failure of political leaders like Nehru and Mrs Gandhi in dealing with the problems arising out of the multicultural nature of Indian society. The central theme of all his works is the almost certain failure of the community's desperate attempts at trying to preserve its lost past glory and its ethnic uniqueness in an increasingly hostile contemporary Indian society which is organised along communal lines.

In this paper an attempt is made to probe the factors responsible for the Parsi confrontation with the mainstream Indian society and the decreasing acceptance of the Parsis by the 'sons of the soil', (a phrase used to describe the original inhabitants of the land) who consider themselves as the true citizens of India: it also tries to analyse how the Parsis responded to this antagonism from their once inferior neighbours. Mistry firmly situates his novels in the historical context of post-independence India especially against the backdrop of specific historical events like the Indo Pak War, the Bangladesh refugee crisis, the declaration of emergency and so on. His attempt is to punctuate the Parsi life in the post independence period at appropriate intervals to study them and comment on them so that the novels work as historical documents and reference points for assessing the Parsi predicament.

Before probing Mistry's concern with the issue of ethnic conflict it may be useful to briefly comment on the history and the present condition of the Parsis in India. The Parsis, it is said migrated from Iran in the 9<sup>th</sup> century A.D fearing Islamic persecution and settled in Gujarat initially and from there they spread to various places, including their present centre, Bombay. The Parsis are Zoroastrians from Persia and they maintain their ethnic uniqueness even today. Despite various arguments which claim that the Parsis did mingle and assimilate into Indian society, the Parsis of the present generation claim ethnic purity and observe the practises of their fore fathers quite religiously. During the pre-colonial period the Parsis did not exercise any special influence on Indian society; they were largely agriculturists and did some small scale business including toddy trade. But with the arrival of the Europeans the Parsis completely redefined their identity by transforming themselves into a merchant community. Under the British rule they rose to the position of the richest community in India and

they adopted western life style. However, with the departure of the British, their decline began on a rapid scale. There are various reasons cited for their decline even though ethnic conflict is considered to be the most important reason. It is against this background that Rohinton Mistry writes his collection of short stories.

Mistry's works are born out of the pessimism prevailing in the community and the bitterness of the loss of Parsi importance in Indian social, political and economic life in the post-independence period. To add to this loss of significance is the conflict that the community is forced to engage in with the neighbouring communities. This has led to a withdrawal of the community from any serious participation in the larger socio, economic activities of the country as reflected in the ghettoed existence of the Parsis in his first collection of short stories rightly titled *Tales from Firozsha Baag*. The short stories of this collection are taken from the lives of Parsis living in an apartment in Bombay. Ethnic conflict forms the background of many of the short stories in the collection including the first story titled "Auspicious Occasions". In all his works except *Fine Balance* the author territorially secludes and confines the Parsi characters of his works to a building close to the larger society but sufficiently closed enough to be walled out from the outside. There is a clear inside/outside relationship in terms of conflict and withdrawal hinted in the metaphorical enclosures in his works even though it may be countered with the objection that the Parsis traditionally choose to stay close to each other.

Ethnic conflict is a feature of most countries in the world both in the west and in the east. This is directly related to multiculturalism practised in these countries. As Adeno Addis rightly observes most countries in the world are multiethnic and multicultural: "There are about 8000 distinct cultural groups inhabiting the more than 180 independent countries that are currently members of the United Nations"(112). This makes ethnic conflict an international issue : "Ethnic conflict is a world wide phenomenon" (3) says one of the leading scholars (Donald L Horowitz) in the field of ethnic conflict research. He mentions a long list of countries which experience ethnic conflict including Northern Ireland, Burma, Bangladesh, the Sudan, Nigeria, Iraq, Uganda, Syria, India, Pakistan, Burundi, Indonesia, Malaysia, Zaire and Guyana and he also attributes reasons for various kinds of ethnic conflicts behind the Somali invasion of Ethiopia, Turkish invasion of Cyprus, Sikh terrorism, Basque terrorism, Corsican terrorism, Palestinian terrorism, the expulsion of Chinese from Vietnam, of Arakanese Muslims from Burma, of Asians from Uganda, of Beninese from the Ivory Coast and Gabon and so on. The issue of ethnic conflict leading to violence has intrigued researchers around the world. The attempt to find a pattern in ethnic conflict has found some success with thinkers like Horowitz, Chandran Kakuthas, Ilan Peleg, Stanley Tambiah, and Paul Brass who have attempted to frame a theory to explain the concept of ethnic conflicts across the world. There is a special attention paid to the case of the newly formed nation states with regard to their ethnic composition and conflict as there is observable data available on these nations.

In postcolonial countries ethnic conflict is accelerated by the leftovers of the colonial policy of divide and rule which privileged members of the English educated minorities like the Ibo in Nigeria, Baganda in Uganda, Parsis in India, and Tutsi in Burundi who were given preference by the colonial rulers .They found themselves facing rising competition and antagonism from the members of other ethnic groups looking for better share in the new government after independence. Crawford discusses how cultural identities become politicised and the ways in which cultural identities were transformed into political identities. He identifies the policies followed by the colonial rulers as one important source of this identity transformation: the case of Sikhs in India he thinks is a perfect example of this kind of identity transformation. The Sikhs were given preferential treatment by the British and the manipulative policy of divide and rule led to politicisation of cultural identities. The same may be said about the Parsis in India also. The role played by state institutions is also crucial in sustaining the politicised identities-these institutions do this by way of defining the "rules of political membership, representation, and resource allocation"( Beverly Crawford 520).

There is a general tendency in ethnic studies to assume that ethnic relations involve superior and subordinate status among the ethnic groups involved in any interaction. Even though it is true that many ethnic groups are beyond dispute subordinated and oppressed , the case may not be true of all the ethnic communities in the world.( Horowitz *Ethnic groups in Conflict*). The baffling case of the Parsis in India may be an evidence for the relative superiority feeling of the Ethnic group members and a positive evaluation of the group by the outsiders and still be ethnically marginalised on the basis of origin and numbers. The Parsis are only numerically minority but in terms of economic affluence the community is the richest ethnic group in India. The Parsi resistance to majoritarian politics in the post independence period is not only the result of a subordinated ethnic group trying to defend itself from the powerful ethnic groups which claim ownership of the new nation because of numerical superiority and origin; it is also the result of the inability of the Parsis to understand their new position in the radically rearranged social and economic higherarchy of India. This higherarchy it must be admitted is ordered along ethnic identity which in India very often takes the form of caste higherarchy also. There are numerous reasons for the ethnic antagonism faced by the Parsis and most of them tend to be the result of the general atmosphere of mobilising mass support for political parties along ethnic and religious lines.

Rohinton Mistry's engagement with the issue of Parsi ethnic identity in the post-independence India began with his collection of short stories titled *Tales From Firozshah Bag* alternatively titled *Swimming*

Lessons. Many stories in the collection deal directly with the problems of Parsi ethnic identity and the resultant crisis. Even though Mistry is settled in Canada and writes from Canada, these collection of eleven short stories largely deal with Parsi life in Bombay except the last of the stories titled *Swimming Lessons* which is set in Canada. The characters of these eleven short stories are people living in an apartment in Bombay and they exhibit different shades of Parsi life in post independent India. Even though these stories present various aspects of Parsi life, the attempt is obviously to portray the decline of Parsi prominence in the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The characters that populate these short stories are type characters exhibiting the typical Parsi traits and they reinforce the general stereotypes of the Parsis. They catalogue Parsi dress, food habits, religious ceremonies and the socio-economic life of the Parsis. There is also a conscious attempt at tracing the reasons for the Parsi withdrawal from the mainstream Indian social, economic and political life as a response to the hostile attitude of the outside society in Bombay. Many stories in the collection discuss the humiliation and violence suffered by the Parsis in Maharashtra as a result of the communal organisation of political parties.

The first story in the collection "Auspicious Occasion" is a perfect illustration of this point. The story describes how the central character Rustomji, a Parsi lawyer in his fifties, was brutally attacked by a mob and how he tries to save his life by playing the clown. In one spectacular clownish act Rustomji destroys the heroism of his fore fathers: "Rustomji the clown was triumphant" (21). The whole incident leading to Rustomji's total humiliation began when somebody unintentionally spat pan on the white dungee of Rustomji who was on his way to the fire temple. The furious Parsi lawyer abused the men gathered around him who were enjoying his pathetic condition, calling them Ghatis, ('ghati' is a term used by the non-Maharashtrians to refer to Maharashtrians; even though the term also means uncultured and uncivilised, it is largely used without these connotations). This enraged the mob, which initially had no intention of harming him, This violent mob was about to attack him. Realising that he had no chance of defending himself Rustomji removes his dentures and appeals to the mercy of the mob which seeing his pathetic condition, leaves him unharmed.

The Parsis constructed their identity as a Martian race during the colonial rule by reconstructing their past from the stories of their Persian ancestors like King Darius. This identity as a Martian race was constructed in opposition to the identity of other Indian communities, which they considered, like their colonial masters, as feminine (Tanya Luhrman). This Martian identity was very crucial to their elevation to the status of a very influential community during the British rule. The Parsis, who are the builders of the city that they live in, command no respect from the neighbouring communities today, and are treated with hostility by the 'ghatis'. The conflict is not only with the outside world; there is a growing conflict within the community also. The great community feeling which once helped the Parsis become successful has vanished in the post-independence era. Rustomji who occupies a flat in the Parsi apartment refuses to contribute to the renovation of his building due to his difference of opinion with the Parsi Panchayet. Only his house is left unpainted in the baag. This conflict within and without is a direct outcome of the loss of prestige of the community and the poor leadership in the community.

Rohinton Mistry like most other Parsi writers takes special care to archive the past of the Parsis in great detail. There is disappointment, frustration, anger and sometimes an indifference with which he handles the certain disappearance of Parsi heroism and greatness of the past. Like the young man in his story titled "Condolence Visit", who visits Daulat, a recently widowed lady for her husband's pugree to be worn on his marriage to make the wedding look very traditional, Mistry himself becomes a collector, an 'archiver' of Parsi past. The collector's image becomes the dominant metaphor of his short story "The Collectors". The solid and well defined ethnic traits of the Parsi community sharply contrast with the rising sense of identity among the other communities of India which was not visible for the Parsis for a long time. Rustomji fails to see the implication of his word 'ghati' when he uses it to abuse a community which for long was taken for granted by the Parsis to be the powerless outsider. The outside has organised itself politically, socially and economically while the Parsis themselves were beginning to be treated as the alien powerless yet stubborn community by the 'ghatis'.

A few of the short stories in the collection directly refer to the ethnic conflict that the Parsis were forced into in Maharashtra. He documents the riot masterminded by Shivsena in the story "Collectors": "... Dr Mody would be dead by the time of the Shiv Sena riots, the tenants would remember him for the gate which would keep out the rampaging mobs"(98). In *Tales From Firozshah Baag* Mistry appears to be preparing his ground for the serious discussions that he intends in the future works. There is also an attempt by Mistry to identify the Parsi suffering with the other marginalised communities of Post-independence India like the poor, homeless and the lower castes. He tries to intertwine the narrative of the unjust treatment of these segments by the government along with the depiction of the Parsi predicament. There is a serious criticism of the policies of the Congress government in stories like the "Collectors": "The Bombay police in a misinterpretation of the nations mandate: *garibi hatao* – eradicate poverty, conducted periodic round ups of pavement dwellers, sweeping into their vans beggars and street vendors, cripples and alcoholics, the homeless and the hungry, and dumped them somewhere outside the city limits;" (119). The pioneers of the ethnic conflict theories (Horowitz,

Wimmer et al) have seriously analysed the various aspects of ethnic relations and the possibility of conflict among ethnic groups during the process of nation building. The principles on which the new state has to be built after independence from colonial rule are vague and are not always decided on the basis of consensus among all segments of the society. Some of the new programmes that the Congress government implemented as part of the nation building venture in India after independence were not very favourable to certain sections of the society. Even though there is no reason to believe that these were directed against the Parsis, the perception of the majority of the Parsis was that these policies were harmful to their community. Mistry takes up these issues on a larger canvass in his novel *Fine Balance*.

Rohinton Mistry like most Parsis of his generation doesn't think that there is going to be any end to their steady decline and expects no better future in India. His characters, like himself, try to migrate to America and European countries in search of better prospects. The present generation Parsis are brought up on advice like the one given by Daddy, a character in "Of White Hairs and Cricket": "And one day you must go too, to America. No future here" (136). This is the obvious result of the ethnic tension developed during the post-independence period; the Parsis are contemplating migration as the only possibility of surviving. The dynamics of a multicultural democratic country hasn't really benefitted them. Mistry uses the metaphor of Cricket, a sport which allowed the Parsis a close friendship with the colonial masters, very frequently in his works, as a way of reaching back to the past which is lost to them and wastes no dreams on the possibility of reconstructing a glorious future. He is a realist and he drives home the point very clearly in his works that the Parsi glory is a thing of the past. The Parsis have to settle for a middle class economic life in general which for them is an indication of the fall from the upper class life they lived during the British rule and the new middle class life they find is very hostile to them. Mistry focuses more on the trials and the tests of the middle class Parsis and hence is able to understand the policies of the govt better as every policy has a direct impact on their life. Like Boman, a character in "The Paying Guests" observes: " 'There are laws to protect the poor' Boman said bitterly after he got home, 'and laws to protect the rich. But middle-class people like us get the bamboo, all the way' "(162). The distrust and anger is not only directed against the outside in Mistry's novels; there is also an uncontrollable rage that he feels against the decay of the high ethical standards according to which the community lived in the past. The unity which the community boasted of in the past has disappeared; as some of the short stories in *Tales From Firozshah Baag* make it clear the Parsis have started fighting each other on minor issues and there is no effective community leadership which could prevent this. The incident of the murder of a Paris Dastoor by the Parsi Chasniwall in "Auspicious Occasion" recurs throughout the collection as a symbolic act reminding the Parsis that their own kind cannot be trusted: as Boman, a character in "The Paying Guests" who initially contemplates requesting the help of his Muslim neighbour against a Parsi paying guest when he refuses to vacate. "There was someone who would be willing to speak in court, Boman knew: the Muslim who lived in the next flat. But desperate as Boman was, he would not stoop to that, to ask him to testify against a fellow Parsi" (168).

The last short story in the collection, "Swimming Lessons" again presents the issue of ethnic conflict in a direct manner. There is no attempt at being vague about his attitude to the ruthless policies of the Shiv Sena leaders in Maharashtra. Mistry very daringly states how Shiv Sena has been in the fore front of the ethnic conflicts and the resultant violence in Maharashtra: Narrators mother in "Swimming Lessons", frustrated by what is happening in Maharashtra, criticises the " Shiv Sena agitation about Maharashtra for Maharashtrians, threatening strikes and Bombay bundh all the time, with no respect for the public" (278). The conflict has really affected normal life in Bombay with the bus drivers and conductors behaving rudely with the passengers. Mistry presents the ugly side of Bombay, torn apart by ethnic conflict and violence, very realistically. Mistry uses contrast as an effective trope to project the corruption and economic crime in India by juxtaposing the Canadian and Indian contexts. The narrator who is settled in Canada assures his parents that he is fine and there is no need to worry about him and hopes that everything is "okay at home"; this formal greeting and casual comments about Bombay irritates his old father who retorts saying "what does he think we worry about, his health, in that country everyone eats well whether they work or not, he should be worrying about us with all the black market and rationing, has he forgotten already how he used to go to the ration-shop and wait in line every week"(279). Mistry is a realist and there is no illusion that he wants to entertain in his fiction. He knows the pulse of the city that he describes because he has lived long in Bombay. But like the father in the last story one might ask Mistry why he has described the suffering, decaying and insignificance of his community without writing anything positive about it; the Parsis are not surely the poor or Middle class that he describes in his stories. They are, as the father recollects "the richest, most advanced and philanthropic community in India" (296). Mistry chooses to narrate only the poor or Middle class Parsi life itself is an indication that he doesn't want to believe with many in his community and nation that everything is right with his community and nation. The story also claims that it provides an immigrant's point of view of his community and his nation. Mistry's diasporic imagination magnifies everything that he saw before his migration and awakens the writer in him. But in the process he also

transforms himself into a prophet who sees the sad end of his community which is weakened by conflicts within and threats from outside.

As Anjali Gera Roy and Meena T Pillai rightly observe Mistry's works critique the way in which a "dominant caste, class and ethnic majority arrogates the right of speak for the people by occluding subaltern and minority histories that include women, ethno-religious minorities and the backward classes" (21). The dominant groups which lay claim to the nation on the basis of being the sons of the soil trigger conflicts which are far more serious than is assumed. Mistry is narrating the untold story of Parsi suffering and ethnic violence which demand answers from the rulers of the land.

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