Chapter 2

Tales from Firozsha Baag: Ethnicity and Local Colour

Tales from Firozsha Baag is Mistry's collection of short stories. In Tales from Firozsha Baag Mistry presents his readers with the ghetto-like Parsi world, where the post-colonial Indian reality is firmly shut out and where the residents display a siege mentality. In these short stories, Mistry grapples with what Kulke has called "identity-forming elements of Parsiness – the Zoroastrian faith, a shared history of flight from Iran and refuge in India, a colonial elite consciousness and feeling of unease in decolonized India". In this insular world the protagonists' lives revolve round the Parsi housing complex of Firozsha Baag, the Parsi religion, the Fire Temple, the Parsi priests, the Parsi calendar, and Parsi cuisine. This collection also highlights Parsi idiosyncrasies as well since, among Indians, Parsi have a not undeserved reputation for eccentricity and even testiness.

In a manner of speaking, Tales from Firozsha Baag is a comedy of manners and Firozsha Baag is "Mistry's Malgudi". As far as the collection is concerned, Mistry is an R.K.Narayan in the making. Tales from Firozsha Baag achieves a unity of theme, tone, and structure through the vital links between character and events from one story to the other. Firozsha Baag is a new locale in the literary horizon which takes shape stroke by stroke in each story. Mistry reveals the skill of a
miniature painter in his characterization of the place. He peels off layer after layer of the lives of the residents of the Baag: “Something would have to be done about peeling paint and plaster; in some places the erosion was so bad, red brick lay exposed.”2 The residents of the Baag lie totally exposed in an excellent “exposition.”

Despite the shared locale and the mood displayed the collection, each story is quite distinctive in the way it frames a slice of the human experience in all its Parsi specificity. “Auspicious Occasion” unfolds a series of disasters that take place on ‘Behram roje.’ The Parsi community of Bombay is the focus of attention and also the husband, Rustomji, who is fifty years old, and his wife, Mehroo, thirty years old. Mehroo’s life is captured deftly in a single sentence:

Who, while trapped in the fervour of matchmaking at the height of the wedding season, could imagine a toothless gummy mouth, morning after morning, greeting a woman in her absolute prime? No one. Certainly not Mehroo. (3)

Mehroo comes from an orthodox Parsi family which observes all the important days on the Parsi calendar. The family has the appropriate prayers and ceremonies performed at the fire temple, and even sets aside a room with an iron frame bed and an iron stool for the women during their unclean time of the month. But despite Rustomji’s toothless mouth and his glances at the young charwoman, Gajra, the
domestic help, Mehroo's life with him is not one of resentment or unfulfilment. She expects to squeeze joy and satisfaction out of every small gesture and ritual of this auspicious day. But nothing seems to go right from the moment in the morning when her constipated husband begins screaming about the leakage from the lavatory in the flat above theirs. Rustomji is quite prepared to believe a similar attitude to women in others, for example, in the priest Dhunjisha, whom he suspects to be an "old goat," though his pious wife doesn't say "nasty things about such a holy figure" (12).

Rustomji is convinced that Dhunjisha is quite capable of slipping in lewd remarks between lines of prayer. Mehroo goes to the prayer meeting on the "auspicious occasion" and discovers that the old man Dhunjisha has been murdered:

She now began to pick up alarming words in the crowd: "... murdered last night ... stabbed in the back ... police and CID ..." Her spirits faltered. All this on Behram roje which she had done everything to make perfect? Why were things being so cruelly wrenched out of her control? She made up her mind to stay till she could speak to someone who knew what had happened. (15)

In a manner quite characteristic of Mistry's short fiction, a central confrontation ensues in the story when Rustomji, dressed in impeccable white and on his way by bus to the fire temple, is spat
upon by a paan-eater on the second deck of the bus: “His starchy
whiteness aroused in him feelings of resplendence and invincibility”
(16). This is a different kind of “murder.” This is also a hand of fate –
actually the “mouth of fate”! When he turns his anger from the paan-
eater to the taunting crowd that gathers quickly around him, he
realizes that he faces the risk of sectarian violence:

On the upper deck sat fate in the form of a mouth
checking tobacco and betel nut, a mouth with a
surfeit of juice and aching jaws crying for relief.
And when the bus halted at Marine Lines, fate
leaned out of the window to release a generous
quantity of stickly, viscous, dark red stuff.

_Dugli_ gleaming in the midday sun. Rustomji
emerged and stepped to the pavement. The squirt
of tobacco juice caught him between the shoulder
blades; blood red and sparkling white. (16-17)

With his wits still around him, he manages to clown his way out of the
situation by removing his dentures and presenting himself to the
crowd as a helpless old man. But the Behram Roje has not gone well
for Mehroo either. She comes home to report things much worse.

A Parsi has killed another Parsi. The old priest at the temple
was killed by a temple worker. The link between the two scenes is
suggested by Mehroo’s startled reaction to Rustomji’s paan stained
dugli and its momentary identification in her distraught mind with

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the priest’s blood stained at the temple. These are connected in an interesting juxtaposition. The quarrel that ensues between the enraged Rustomji and the irate mob provides a quasi funny situation where very native and choice abuses are hurled contributing to local colour and the growth of Indian English vocabulary. The menaced quality of life that is depicted in the scene derives not only from dangers lurking outside the community but also from the fissures within the group, hinted at earlier in Rustomji’s refusal to go along with other tenants to pay for the painting of the flats:

“And the WC?”
“Still leaking.”
She re-emerged with the two cups
She had left ready in the kitchen: “Another cup of tea then?”
Rustomji nodded gratefully.

The story ends, however, on a note of tenderness, a shared ritual of tea-taking between Rustomji and Mehroo who gets a rare glimpse of the softness underneath her husband’s tough exterior and feels very close to him for the moment. The generous sprinkling of ‘native’ words throughout the tale makes it not just Indian but also specifically ‘Parsi’ whose life at the Firozsha Baag is authentically re-created by Mistry. Behram roje, dugli, pheto, navjote, dhandar-paato, Sali-boti, loban, ailchee, chasni, Ashem vahoo and such other words contribute to this aura.
“One Sunday,” another story in the collection, introduces us to a few characters connected with Firozsha Baag and to the neighbouring Tar Gully life. Apart from the boys of the Baag, Kersi and Percy, we are introduced to the outsider, odd-job man, the thief, Francis. The tale begins with Najamai’s outing from the Baag to visit her sister’s family at Bandra which proves quite eventful. The activities of her neighbour in her absence, like stealing ice-cubes from Najamai’s fridge, are interesting. While leaving for her sister’s place Bandra she reflects thus:

“that Tehmina next door and the Boyces downstairs use my fridge as much as they want do. Anyone who has evil intentions about my empty flat will think twice when he see the coming-going of neighbours.” (25-26)

At eleven-thirty Tehmina cautiously opens the door of Najamai’s flat and peers out. She makes certain that the hallway is free of any risk of any confrontation with a Boyces on the way to Najamai’s Fridge. “It is shameful the way those people misuse the poor lady’s goodness” (26), thought Tehmina. “All Najamai said when she bought the fridge was to please feel free to use it. It was only out of courtesy. Now those Boyces behave as it they have a share in the ownership of the fridge” (26). Tehmina and the Boyces add to the furthering of the “local colour”. The eroticism that runs through the narratives of Mistry appears here too:
When Najamai's daughters had gone abroad, they took with them the youthful sensuality that once filled the flat and which could drive Kersi giddy with excitement on a day like this, with no one home, and all before him the prospect of exploring Vera and Dolly's bedroom, examining their undies that invariably lay scattered around, running his hands through lacy frilly things, rubbing himself with these and on one occasion, barely rescuing them from a sticky end. Now, exploration world yield nothing but Najamai's huge underclothes.

Tehmina's memories are of a different sort:

From downstairs came the strains of "The Blue Danube" Tehmina swayed absently. Strauss! The music reminded her of a time when the world was a simpler, better place to live in, when trips to Tar Gully did not involve the risk of spit globs.

The evocation of the atmosphere of the Tar Gully is the counterpoint to the life of Firozsha Baag, with its 'mutka' and ghatis. The pursuit of the thief Francis down the Tar Gully provides a racy conclusion to this tale.

"The Ghost of Firozsha Baag" is Mistry's favourite tale. The tale is a triumph of narration. The narrative technique is extremely interesting as it is in the individualistic language and style of an 'ayah' from Goa – a devout Catholic. The life of Firozsha Baag is
observed here from an outsider's point of view – from the point of view of a simple, honest, uneducated 'outsider.' The English that is used by the ayah is both authentic and quaint. The narrator's personality comes through loud and clear with all her background, upbringing, humility, likes and dislikes, prejudices, and essential unsophisticated honesty and innocence. The narration reminds one of the use of the West Indian dialect in Samuel Selvon's stories, especially 'Brackley and Bed.' The creative use of an authentic dialect, different from the 'standard' English is an interesting aspect of Commonwealth Writing. It takes us back to the discussion of the subject by Kenneth Ramchand in his chapter “The Language of the Master,” in *The West Indian Novel and Its Background*. The utter simplicity of the narrator is reflected in the story as well as the way it is narrated:

Jaakaylee narrates the appearance of the ghost. She saw ghosts for the first time in her father's field in Goa: “when I was little I saw them in my father's small field in Goa” (43). But her Bombay ghost was different from the Goa ghost:

Once a week the ghost came and always on Friday. On Fridays I eat fish, so I started thinking, maybe he likes smell of fish. Then I just ate vegetarian and yet he came. For almost a whole year the ghost slept with me, every Friday night, and Christmas was not far away. (49)
Mistry's mixture of eroticism and humour gives his whole narration a light touch and a tongue-in-cheek bantering tone. Jaakaylee goes on to confess thus:

I told Father D'Silva everything and then I was feeling much better. Father D'Silva said I was blameless because it was not my wish to have the bhoot sleeping with me. (50)

Jaakaylee's belief was that if she had fish curry, the Bhoot wouldn't come. "Believe or don't believe the bhoot did not come." (50) Thus the end of the bhoot affair. The bhoot was ashamed because Father D'Silva "knew about what he had been doing to me in the darkness every Friday night" (50). The children in Firozsha Baag would shout, "Ayah bhoot! Ayah bhoot!" every time they saw Jaakaylee: "See today, at Apsara Cinema, R.K. Anand's New fillum Bhoot Bungla, starring Jaakaylee of Block B! just like that!" (47). They made a lot of fun of Jaakaylee but she did not care, because she knew what she had seen. The climax – rather the anti-climax – comes when Jaakaylee herself is mistaken for a ghost by her employer Bai. On a cold night around 2 A.M. when Jaakaylee felt cold and covered herself completely in her white bedsheet and went out on the balcony, after sometime she saw her Bai seth's car come in the compound. She leaned over the balcony. Her bai looked up suddenly and then she screamed loudly “bhoot! bhoot” (53). Jaakaylee almost fell down faint. It was not angry
screaming; it was frightened screaming. It took sometime for them to come up because she sat inside the car and locked all the doors. She would not come out until the bhoot climbed upstairs. She switches on every staircase light to make sure the ghost was gone and she came in the house at last straight to her passage, with the result that after that many people in Firozsha Baag started to believe in the ghost – including Dustoorji of A Block, who came one day and "taught bai a prayer". He asked the people to perform jashan. He picked up a Parsi calendar for an auspicious day. That morning Jaakaylee had to wash the whole balcony floor specially, then Dustoorji came, spread a white sheet. So jashan was done and Dustoorji went home with all his prayer things. But the people in Firozsha Baag who did not believe in the ghost heard about the prayer ceremony. They began talking and mocking. Some said Jaakaylee's bai has gone crazy. Bai will not talk to those people in the baag. She is angry and says that she does not want friends who think she is crazy. She thinks that Jashan was not very powerful, so the ghost can come again. She wants everyone to see the show and know the truth like her.

The racy narration, all in the language of a simple Goan ayah makes this short story a remarkable achievement. The half-serious, half-moking, ironic tone and the utter simplicity of the narrator's narrative constitute a triumph in creating local colour in this tale.
A deeper love finds expression in “Condolence Visit” which relates to Daulat’s grief over her husband Minocher’s death after a prolonged illness. Daulat and Minocher both were born and brought up in Firozsha Baag. “They were the only childhood sweethearts in Firozsha Baag who had got married; all the others had gone their separate ways” (67). Mistry who gives his erotic imagination free play in most of his other stories refrains from doing so in this story of high love and remembrance. But as the title suggests, the story is even more about Daulat’s dread at the rituals surrounding condolence visits and her fear that the visitors prying questions would not allow her to hold on to the memory of those final blessed six days. She arms herself for the expected stream of condoling friends and relatives. She wishes now that she had accepted the gift of a cassette player from her nephew, Sid Sorosh – the protagonist in “squatter” – and enjoys imagining the answers she would have recorded for them. But if the recording machine could not empower her against the meddling intruders, her late husband’s handsome black ‘pugree,’ the ceremonial wedding turban that adorns a glass case, comes to her rescue. Against the pious objections of a distant visiting cousin and her prying neighbour Najamai, she gives the pugree to a Parsi young man who expects to have a traditional wedding soon. This action of hers privileges her desire to deal with her grief in her own way and not according to societal rules. This is an inclination already asserted in
her refusal to let the bedside lamp go out after the conventional four days.

In “The Collectors,” the Collector’s friendship with the gentle and sensitive Dr. Mody who was transferred from Mysore to assume the principalship of Bombay Veterinary College is significant. He moves into Firozsha Baag with his wife and son Pesi. They occupy the vacant flat on the third floor of C-Block, next to the Bulsara family. In his short life at the Baag, he wins universal respect for championing tenants’ rights. He is betrayed by Mrs. Mody who resents the fact that her husband finds time for Jahangir, but not for their own deviant son, Pesi. The title “Exercisers,” refers to a disapproving fascination with the big-muscled exercisers in the public park. Jahangir, a college student, fails to win the freedom to resolve his own conflict between his love for Behroze and his parents’ rejection of her. His failure is inevitable, once he accepts the intervention of Bhagawan Baba, the holy man, who speaks in riddles and talks about life being a trap.

“Lend Me Your Light” is a tale imbued with social, even socialist, meanings. The legendary Bombay tiffin carriers are pictured memorably here; so is the skeletal coolie at the railway station with several pieces of family luggage balanced on his head and hands or the equally skeletal rickshaw-puller. “Lend Me Your Light” begins with Tagore’s words from Gitanjali. “....Your lights are all lit – then where do you go with your lamp? My house is all dark and lonesome – lend
me your light” (173). These words of Tagore acquire a piquant poignancy in the context of the story which, when analysed, reveals the plight of the Indians as they remain exploited and are completely helpless and at the mercy of the powerful. Most of the expatriate writers suffer from a sense of guilt which gets reflected in their stories, because though all writing, to a certain extent, is a process of self-analysis and a search for answers, expatriate writing is more so. The question, “Is it desirable to leave one’s country? becomes a tangled puzzle. The unraveling of which involves anguish, nostalgia, guilt for the writers and their characters.”

The reason for leaving one’s country is always clear enough: for better prospects and good opportunities in the land of the plenty. But what is not foreseen by the migrant is the blurring of the definition of his own identity that is the unavoidable outcome of the transplanting process. Salman Rushdie, while talking of Gunter Grass, pinpoints the turbulence and turmoil a migrant goes through when he says: “A full migrant suffers, traditionally, a triple disruption; he loses his place, he enters into an alien language, and he finds himself surrounded by beings whose social behaviour and codes are unlike and sometimes even offensive to his own. And this is what makes a migrant such a pathetic figure, because roots, languages and social homes have been three of the most important parts of the definition of what it is to be a humane being.”
Returning to Tagore’s words cited earlier, the less fortunate seem to be importunating their comparatively better off brethren not to leave them because they need their help, sympathy, and attention. The villagers, living in far off places are poor and exploited. They need the help of their educated fellow human beings to be taken out of the clutches of the oppressors. The writer highlights the moral failure of those who go away and seems to empathise with Percy who chooses to stay on in India and work among the villagers, even at risk to his own life.

Of the three friends, Jamshed, Percy, and Kersi, the later two are brothers, Jamshed and Kersi leave for America and Canada respectively. The motives for migration are obviously material prosperity, better prospects for career advancement. Kersi’s parents seem to take the inferiority of their nation as a given:

"but for the sake of his own future, he must. There is a lot of opportunity in Toronto we’ve seen advertisements in newspapers from England, where Canadian Immigration is encouraging people to go to Canada. Of course, they won’t advertise in a country like India - Who would want these bloody ghatis is to come charging into their fine land? – but the office in New Delhi is holding interviews and selecting highly qualified applicants.”

(178)
'Lend Me Your Light' extends from Firozsha Baag to Mistry's new homeland, Canada. The tale relates to two immigrants. One of them feels compelled to relinquish his Canadian dream to return to India. The other one achieves a tentative peace with his new land as a young writer. The tension between these two strategies of language use, mastery of form, and deformation of mastery is roughly played out in the central dramatic conflict in "Lend Me Your Light". This story deals with problems of immigrant experience, but the tone here is unmistakably tragic. Enlarging on the opposition between two childhood friends, Jamshed, who is scornful of his native India and leaves for the promised land of America, and Percy, who adamantly stays in India to help villagers in their fight against exploitation, the story finds its focus in Kersi, the narrator protagonist, who comes to present the struggle between the two extreme positions.

Even in the school days in Bombay, Jamshed sets himself apart from others. Instead of having lunch with his classmates in the school's drill hall-cum-lunchroom, he eats in the family car:

His food arrived precisely at one o'clock in the chauffeur-driven, air-conditioned family car, and was eaten in the leather-upholstered luxury of the back seat, amid this collection of hyphenated lavishness. (174)
Jamshed's letter from America to Kersi who is in Canada dubs India as a dismal place where "Nothing ever improves, just too much corruption." It's all part of the ghati mentality." Kersi wonders why Jamshed is so full of disdain and discontent "even when he was no longer living under those conditions" (181). Percy, by contrast, refuses Jamshed's invitation to take up a new life in the United States and continues to fight for change and justice in a small Maharashtrian village. His brother, Kersi, the narrator of the story, is however, not nearly as certain about his own position. He too, like Jamshed, has emigrated, though he has chosen Canada rather than the USA. But unlike Jamshed, Kersi has made efforts to retain something of his ethnic past:

'I became a member of the Zoroastrian Society of Ontario. Hoping to meet people from Bombay, I also went to the Parsi New Year celebrations and dinner' (182)

This attitude of Kersi towards his country is quite evident from his irritating reply to Jamshed's condemnation of India. He tries to prove Jamshed wrong by becoming a member of the Parsi club and visiting Parsi get-togethers. He wants to be a part of India by participating in all that is Indian in Canada. His letter to Jamshed does not share Jamshed's contempt for India.
That Kersi inhabits the ambivalent space between two cultures becomes strikingly evident when he comments on a letter that he receives from his brother Percy:

There you were, my brother, waging battles against corruption and evil, while I was watching sitcoms on my rented Granada T.V. Or attending dinner parties at Parsi homes to listen to chit-chat about airlines and trinkets. (184)

Kersi in this passage, recognizes the extent to which his Indian heritage has been effaced by the North American culture. He also understands that his attempts to retain some vestige of his ancestral culture have resulted in little more than idle chat.

Kersi's visit to India does not solve his riddles. Having defended India against Jamshed's criticism, he too indulges in bad faith. His words in this context reveal the truth:

Bombay seemed dirtier than ever. I remembered what Jamshed had written in his letter, and how it had annoyed me, but now I couldn't help thinking he was right. Hostility and tension seemed to be perpetually present in buses, shops, trains. (187)

Mistry wants to make it clear that both these characters are being inauthentic. He juxtaposes the pair with Percy – an individual who is self possessed, and having integrity and authenticity. He too lives in
the same Indian environment which is found to be insufferable by Jamshed and Kersi. If anything, he lives under worse conditions, which involve a threat to his very life because he is living and working in a village as a part of a group of young, enthusiastic persons, who help the credit-burdened poor farmers. But he does not make these hostile and uncomfortable conditions an excuse for leaving Bombay for abroad. On the contrary, he has in the words of Tagore decided to lend his light to the deprived people whose houses are dark.

Kersi submits himself to a process of self-correction. The truth that he tells us is this:

I have been there just once. And on that occasion I fled the place in a very short time, feeling extremely ill at ease and ashamed, wondering why all this did not make me feel homesick or at least a little nostalgic. (182)

Kersi's confession alerts the readers to the fact that the "authentic" Indian essence he seeks to recover here is nothing but constructed memory or to put it slightly differently, this self-corrective gesture constitutes for Kersi, a pronounced recognition of his own hybridity. To put it in the words of Ashok Mathur, "despite being drawn to his brother's strong sense of purpose, Kersi also bears within himself much of Jamshed." When Kersi returns to India, he is ashamed to admit that his views are very much in accord with those of Jamshed:
Bombay seemed dirtier than ever. I remembered what Jamshed had written in his letter, and how it had annoyed me, but now I couldn't help thinking he was right. 

As Ajay Heble says,

I do not mean to suggest here, that Kersi simply comes down on the side of Jamshed, but rather to indicate that the force of Mistry's accomplishment in "Lend Me Your Light" as indeed in many of the other tales in the volume resides in his evocation of the plight of the cultural hybrid: the impossibility of defining immigrant identity exclusively in terms of one's ancestral past or in terms of one's ability to assimilate into the new culture.9

To be authentic extracts some price. Percy is prepared to pay it. Jamshed and Kersi are not. But the people like Jamshed and Kersi pay another kind of price for being inauthentic. Confusion and misery afflict them. Kersi's self-definition remains confused and not expressed clearly. He waits for his epiphany. But there are no epiphanies at the quotidian level of existence. One has to search for answers. Jamshed pays a kind of price. He has accidentally met Kersi near Flora Fountain during his visit to Bombay. Pointing to the pavement stalls, he says:
He is angry with Bombay. In fact, he is angry with himself because he suffers from guilt. However, Percy is at peace with himself. The group, of which he is a part, arranged interest-free loans for the farmers in the form of seeds and fertilizers at cheaper prices. Navjeet is killed. When the whole disgusting incident is related to Jamshed by Percy's mother, Jamshed's response is along the expected lines:

"I told you from the beginning, all this was a waste of time and nothing would come of it, remember? Every time we met we would talk about it, and you used to make fun of me wanting to go abroad. But I still think the best thing for you is to move to the States. There is so much you could achieve there. There, if you are good at something you are appreciated, and you get ahead. Not like here, where everything is controlled by uncle-auntie, and ..." (192)

However, Percy discards Jamshed's selfish wisdom. He turns to his mother and says calmly in a quiet voice: "Could we have dinner right away? I have to meet my friends at eight o'clock. To decide our next move in the village" (192).
These lines show Percy's desire to continue his struggle. Mistry clearly puts Percy on a higher pedestal in the story in relation to the other two. His authenticity is valorized. Jamshed with his guilt and anger, and Kersi with his dichotomies, ambiguities, and resultant confusions and blurred self are marginal human beings practising bad faith.

"Squatter" from Mistry's collection of *Tales from Firozsha Baag* presents a story within a story, and it comes to a focus in the character of Sarosh, an India from the Parsi community in Bombay who decides to emigrate to Canada. Before Sarosh leaves his native India, a party is held in his honour, and at this party his friends and family debate the relative merits and demerits of Sarosh's decision to go abroad. Some of his friends commend, Sarosh and suggest that by immigrating he is doing a wonderful thing: his whole life they feel is going to change for better. Others, however, are somewhat more circumspect. They insist that Sarosh is making a big mistake: "emigration," they argue is "all wrong, but if he wanted to be unhappy that was his business, they wished him well" (154). As a way of striking a kind of compromise between these two opposed functions, Sarosh in "a moment of lightheartedness" (154) makes the following promise:

'My dear family, my dear friends, if I do not become completely Canadian in exactly ten years from the time I land there, then I will come back. I
promised. So please, no more arguments. Enjoy the party.' (154-55)

But his poor worried mother pulls him aside. She leads him to the back room and withdraws her own and aged prayer book from her purse, saying, "I want you to place your hand upon the Avasta and swear that you will keep that promise" (155).

Ten years later, we find Sarosh, now Sid, completely westernized in every respect except that he is unable to use western toilets:

"At the point where our story commences, 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. (153)

Later we are told that Sarosh, in the privacy of his own home, is able to squat barefoot. Elsewhere however:

If he had to go with his shoes on, he would carefully cover the seat with toilet paper before climbing up. He learnt to do this after the first time, when his shoes had left telltale footprints on the seat. He had to clean it with a wet paper towel, luckily no one had seen him. (156)
For Nariman, the storyteller, the case of Sarosh-Sid provides an opportunity not only to reject the hypocrisy of both the American 'melting pot' and Canadian multiculturalism, but also to suggest the Parsis' capacity to laugh at one of their own. Sid's story provides an important counterbalance to the other tales. Nariman tells his young listeners about Parsi heroes stories that border on ethnocentrism. In fact, the story of Sarosh significantly begins with the counter-example of Vara and Dolly, two girls who “went abroad for studies many years ago, and never came back. They settled there happily.” (153).

These references more suggestively functions as a reminder that different individuals have had varying degrees of success in negotiating their identity vis-à-vis a new system of cultural referents. It is however tempting to see in Sarosh's predicament something that might be symptomatic of the immigrant experience. His inability to use western toilets becomes a sign of his failure to adapt to a new culture. The discomfort occasioned by this is played out through two overlapping areas of alienation: personal unease and social displacement. Sarosh's tale is a kind of narrative of failed conversion: he senses that he has failed because he has not become completely Canadian. On a social level, Sarosh's washroom habits seem to give rise to an increased sense of hostility and a strong feeling of dislike and fear. But the most important thing that we need to keep in mind here is the fact that Sarosh’s story is framed by Nariman, the
storyteller, who has a penchant for unpredictability and confusion and for building up “lots of subtle gradations of tone and texture” (147). The figure of Nariman, the storyteller, is important not only in this particular story, but in Mistry’s fiction in general precisely because he, like Sarosh, inhabits the interstices of culture. Despite using the inserted tale of Sarosh as a warning for future generations of Indians who plan to seek happiness and success abroad, Nariman’s own patterns of behaviour implicitly work to undermine the impact of his story. If the example of Sarosh seems to point up the dangers inherent in the process of ethnic interaction and to argue for a return to one’s place of origin, Nariman himself contradicts the lesson which he seeks to impart to the listeners of his story. Though they may initially appear to have little, if anything, to do with the story of Sarosh, the allusions to western popular culture are important for the subtle and intriguing ways in which they remind us that post-colonial identity is always already a hybridized formation.

Mistry then frames Sarosh’s story within Nariman’s in order more effectively to explore the consequences of migration. Rather than simply proceeding on the basis of an opposition between the new world and the old world, Mistry interrogates the old relationship between diverse cultural groups and dismantles traditional structures of authority which privilege an essential cultural purity. Moreover, Mistry employs the story within-the-story technique in “Squatter” as a
kind of structural analogue for the very process which Sarosh undergoes: re-forming of the self in a new culture. The shift from a familiar frame of reference to a strange and foreign one becomes a structural enactment of Sarosh’s experience of cultural displacement. The effect which Nariman’s story has on his listeners reinforces this point: the fact that they are unable to determine whether this is a comic or a serious tale forces them to recognize the extent to which notions of purity and structures of authoritarian discourse are being undermined:

Some of the boys struggled hard to keep straight faces. They suspected that Nariman was not telling just a funny story, because if he intended them to laugh there was always some unmistakable way to let them know. (154)

In order to become a Canadian, Sarosh seems to want to forget his ethnic past, efface his origins, and lose his sense of identity by immersing himself in the western hegemonic culture. His goal is clearly assimilation and his inability to accomplish the desired transformation can only be seen as a sign of failure. Sarosh, thus, in his own peculiar way, seems to support the statement advanced by the sociologist Robert Park in his 1928 essay, “Human Migration and the Marginal Man.” In this famous piece, Park speaks thus: “moral dichotomy and conflict is probably characteristic of every immigrant during the period of transition, when old habits are being discarded...
and new ones are not yet formed. It is inevitably a period of inner turmoil and intense self-consciousness." In Park's view the transitional decade in Sarosh's life would lead to "a new type of personality."

The fact that he knows Sarosh and is, in fact, invited to his welcome home party signals Nariman's position inside the frame. Nevertheless, Nariman's own hybridized identity alerts us to the possibility that the framed moments in Mistry's text might be as much about Nariman as they are about Sarosh. Or to put it slightly differently, the border which separates the person doing the framing from the person being framed is itself subject to the kind of blurring we see throughout the story. Given this position both inside and outside the frame, Nariman finds himself in a particularly effective discursive situation, able to speak with what Linda Hutcheon calls "the forked tongue of irony ... which allows speakers to work within a dominant tradition but also to challenge it."

The characters in almost all tales work from within in order to subvert: this is, of course, precisely what Rohinton Mistry does throughout the stories in Tales from Firozsha Baag. In Mistry's fiction we might expect the strategies of language use to overlap and interlock in a way which makes it difficult to distinguish agency from response, cause from effect. Mistry's mastery of form, his "ability to
give the trick to white expectation” expresses itself in the ironic
continuation of certain stereotypes and clichés.

“The Management of Grief” by Bharati Mukherjee and
“Squatter” by Rohinton Mistry establish the fact that change in the
landscape necessarily implies change in sensibility. It creates a rift
between the past and the present. If one tries to bridge the gap, it
ends in a sterile contemplation of the past. In this attempt, the
individual is alienated from himself. In other words immigrants keep
“surrendering little bits of a reluctant self every year, clutching to the
souvenirs of an ever-retreating past” (2). In the story by Bharati
Mukherjee, Shaila the woman protagonist, loses her husband and two
sons in an air crash caused by terrorist bombing in 1985. Many Indo-
Canadians lost their families in this. Her emotional control surprises
those around her. Her sentiments are congruous with the cold country
Canada itself. When Shaila returns to India, she flutters between two
worlds. She is too old to give up one world, and too young to accept the
other world. In search of peace, she travels the holy places like
Varanasi, Hardwar. She also takes the help of palmists who offer her
cosmic solutions. She ends up buying a trip back to Canada. She is
unaware where the voyage will take her and where it will end. Like
Sarosh, she will echo one day the incongruity with the landscape:
that the world can be a bewildering place, and dreams and ambitions are, often paths to the most pernicious of traps.’ (168)

To conclude, the protagonists in the stories of Rohinton Mistry and Bharati Mukherjee are not unusual in experiencing schizophrenia under an alien sky. It is a commonplace and universal phenomenon. The change in the landscape implies change in culture and sensibility. The external problems like Sarosh’s inability to use western toilets and Shaila’s inability to let her emotions loose are merely maps of the mind.

In another tale by Rohinton Mistry “The Paying Guests” Rustomji’s sister and her husband seek the advice of Rustomji to evict their sub-tenants. Each tale introduces new details or unknown facets of characters we already know. In the ways in which characters interact and operate beyond the confines of any single story, it is possible to read these tales together as a novel. The point of view varies from one tale to another, although a quickly shifting multifarious narration is most frequently employed. At least three of the stories have the young Kersi’s point of view, and two of them including “Swimming Lessons” use a first person narrative. Kersi, the young immigrant writer of “Swimming Lessons” comes as close to being Mistry’s altar ego in his fiction as any character is allowed to.
The notion of language as a sign of cultural distinctiveness plays an important role in “Swimming Lessons”, the final tale in Mistry's collection. The story is exceptional in the sense that we get a glimpse of Firozsha Baag from the “outside,” from the distance of Canada, in fact. The fact that the story itself is printed in two types—ordinary and italics—is an integral part of the narrative technique as in Faulkner's *Sound and the Fury*.

“Swimming Lessons” is the only story set fully in Canada. However, even here the Canadian world is juxtaposed with Indian memories. The distinctness of Parsi identity here is not overtly invoked. The initial failure of the protagonist to master the Chaupatty Beach water in Bombay as well as the swimming pool water in Canada symbolizes a failure to assimilate in either society. However, by the end of the story, water, the amniotic fluid, is the medium through which the protagonist is reborn.

The first person narration is in itself interesting. The unnamed narrator is probably Kersi once again and in this piece we learn that Kersi, like Mistry, is a writer. Kersi’s narrative relates to his unsuccessful attempts to learn swimming and his equally frustrated desire to view young female bodies in nudity in and around his apartment building. The characters gathered at the Don Mills apartment building where Kersi lives now represent a diversity in age, social, and ethnic background, national origin or personal eccentricity,
and certainly match the liveliness, if not the intricacy or subtlety, of the Baag citizens. In “Swimming Lessons” the “writerly text” takes the form of alternating narratives – the son in Canada writes stories out of his remembered past, and the old parents read the stories and disagree about the creative energies at work in their son’s art and in the choices he makes as well as the consequences these choices have for him and his readers, especially the Parsis. After having received a short letter from their son in Toronto, the narrator’s parents fashion their own letter to him.

Here is the father telling his wife what to write:

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. (236)

Firozsha Baag and Canada are brought together in a “unified sensibility” in the story “Swimming Lessons”:

I examine the swimming trunks I bought last week. Surf king says the label, Made in Canada-Fabrique Au Canada, I’ve been learning bits and pieces of French by bilingual labels at the supermarket too. (235)
Thus alongside an insistence on Kersi’s heritage, there is an acknowledgement of the necessity of translation: an awareness of the extent to which Kersi has been involved in the process of integrating his ethnic differences into the sameness of a western cultural mainstream. To the extent Mistry uses “Swimming Lessons” to answer some of his critics and reviewers, including those who would like him to write more about Canada, these juxtapositions are quite self-conscious, not only in the humorous lines but also in narrative cohesiveness of the tale.

In the migration stories in Tales from Firozsha Baag thus, Mistry, through a series of interlocking discursive formations, articulates the ambivalent space between the ‘old’ culture of India and the ‘new’ culture of Canada. Caught between there and here, his characters and narrators, sometimes in spite of themselves, are engaged in the activity of defining their own hybridity. Mistry himself is a south-Asian Canadian. He negotiates between different cultural traditions and his fiction powerfully attests to the need for the Canadian literary landscape to open up to include a new kind of critical activity. Indeed, the emergence in Canada of writers like Mistry indicates the necessity of moving beyond a nationalistic critical methodology where “the desire to come to terms with oneself in place and time and in relation to others” is as David Tassars suggests, “a national instinct.”14 Clearly Rohinton Mistry is learning more than
“bits and pieces” in Canada and not just ‘French’. No wonder this promising young writer gave up a bank job to devote himself full time to writing.
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