Chapter 2

Towards a Hybrid Identity in *Tales From Firozsha Baag*

Introduction

In 1987, Rohinton Mistry’s first volume, a collection of connected short stories, was published in the United States as *Swimming Lessons and Other Stories from Firozsha Baag*, and in Canada and the United Kingdom as *Tales from Firozsha Baag*. It contained the two Hart House Prize-winning stories, *Auspicious Occasion* and *One Sunday*, but also can be seen to have introduced themes, symbols and techniques that recur in his later writings. These contain topics such as families and their often thorny internal politics: cultural difference, (ethnic/hybrid) identity, alienation, problems of assimilation, feeling of otherness, parsi rituals, customs and community consciousness. Although many of these interests were to receive a more absolute treatment in his following novels, they can all be seen at work in the lives of the characters who dwell in the eponymous Bombay apartment block and that will be the central concern of my analysis of the collection. The present chapter will further include a discussion on the problems regarding transculturation and how their identity is affected by their past experience in the present life.

In *Tales from Firozsha Baag*, Rohinton Mistry draws a make-believe Parsi world, Firozsha Baag, in the city of Bombay. He creates it with all its religion, customs, traditions, conventions, culture and even their food habits. The Parsis that reside in Firozsha Baag are different because of their religious practices and values. Set in an alien setting in Canada and at home in Bombay, stories present insight in dramatizing the Parsi world view, in relation to the levels of ‘assimilation’ and ‘Westernization’. The stories, *Auspicious Occasion, One Sunday, The Ghost of Firozsha Baag, Condolence Visit, The Collectors*, Of
White Hairs and Cricket, The Paying Guests, and Exercises focus on people and their experiences as a Parsi community which is the background for another set of stories, namely, Squatter, Lend Me Your Light, and Swimming Lessons. In the last set of stories, Mistry depicts the impact of diaspora on the lives of young Parsi protagonists abroad. These stories set wholly or partially in Canada and display to the maximum extent the image of the diasporic aspect. In these stories, Mistry transfers the experience from India to Canada and the diasporic strain of belonging to a minority group (Parsi) in India as well as in Canada. The residents of Firozsha Baag are mostly Paris and they constitute a tiny minority in the multi-cultural country, India. I would like to begin my discussion with three stories, which can be said as a short story cycle, in this chapter Lend Me Your Light, Squatter and Swimming Lessons reflect distinct and complex attitudes towards cultural difference. Finally I will add a brief discussion on remaining stories of the collection as my major focus will be on above stated three stories. Since these stories present the immigrant experience they suggest a parallel to Rohinton Mistry, the immigrant writer who develops his witing and themes from his past experiences in India and his immigrant experiences in Canada. Nostalgia and a mood of musing mark the pages as Mistry recalls and relives his childhood and teenager years in the Parsi ‘Baag’.

Among the leading Parsi writers, Rohinton Mistry pays more attention to the portrayal of his own community and his fictional works are replete with numerous details of Parsi life culture and religion. Like all other Parsi writers, Mistry is anxious for the preservation of the ethnic identity of his community. He presents his community through the different narratives of his characters who consistently express their concerns for the community and the changes that affect it. By focusing on their community in their narratives, they preserve and protect themselves and thus throw light on the existing reality.

For this reason, he attempts to record the story of the Parsi community and their ancient Zoroastrian faith. Thus, his works may truly be regarded as a
commentary on the domestic and social life of Parsis. It explores an authentic account of their religion, rituals, customs & manners, their fire – temples, priests, towers of silence and even their cuisine. All his works – *Tales from Firozsha Baag*, *Such A Long Journey*, *A Fine Balance* and *Family Matters* present the exhaustive and true account of the Parsi community and their dynamic nature. Craig Tapping (1992) has offered an excellent synopsis of *Tales from Firozsha Baag*’s aims and themes. He says that it is,

’an exemplary postmodern, postcolonial literary collection. It stages the translation of oral cultures into literature with a commentary on the traditional society from which such practices derive; it reflects on textuality and on the growing consciousness and literary abilities of its protagonist author, it mocks well-meaning Anglo-Saxon liberalism through satire; and it appropriates the inherited narratives of the imperial canon in parody which opens our understanding of such figural systems.’

(45)

The last set of stories starting with *Squatter* features Sarosh who decides to emigrate and leaves Bombay for Toronto. The story focuses on the implications of migration, highlighting the ways in which immigration can fail but also suggesting strategies by which it might succeed. While the usefulness of ethnic difference, i.e. the perseverance of old conventions, is interrogated by Sarosh in Canada, the outline of the story remains within an Indian location as well as within a Non-Western tradition that in its reliance on story-telling and orality emphasizes difference as a means for cultural survival. It will be argued that *Squatter* confirms rather than undermines conventional assumptions of post colonialism with respect to cultural difference. It does not so much detail the pessimistic sides of retaining cultural difference but foregrounds the positive effects of a politics of difference clearly (Nariman) as well as negative (Sarosh). Sarosh, a Parsi who changes his name to Sid once he arrives in
Toronto cannot use a toilet in the Western way. Being unable to sit on a toilet seat, he can only squat like an Indian once he feels the urge to help himself: “Morning after morning, he had no choice but to climb up and simulate the squat of our Indian latrines. If he sat down, no amount of exertion could produce success.” (153) For satisfactory understanding of *Squatter* it is crucial to “consider the social and cultural ramifications of Sarosh’s failure.” In Mistry’s treatment of the immigration experience in *Squatter*, toilet habits become metonymic of Otherness. The western reader of the story discovers that there is no single way of attending to one’s bodily functions. While defecating is natural and common, the ways to defecate are cultural as well as culturally specific. Squatting becomes the sign of a different culture, a culture, moreover, in which sitting (rather than squatting) becomes the marked case, i.e. the strange way of defecating.

It could be asserted that in *Squatter*, by way of a postcolonial counter-discursive move, the exclusion becomes the norm and the cultural margin the new centre. Mistry questions Western assumptions by making strange what the Western reader takes for granted. Thus what has been denigrated and devalued as eccentric/ex-centric is invested with new decorum in the context of an appreciation of Otherness. Or so it would seem. For although Mistry’s literary techniques resemble postcolonial strategies, it is essential to apprehend that if one takes as a starting point for an elucidation Sarosh’s subject position, then “*Squatter*” departs from postcolonialism in an important aspect. In distinct opposition to the strategic value postcolonial critics accord to metonymical inscriptions of Otherness for the depiction of other cultures, difference is not illustrated by Sarosh as liberating but conceived as impediment instead. This is reflected in the persistence of old toilet habits as well as in Sarosh’s failure to alter his name to Sid.

In *Squatter*, names give the impression of different cultures in much the same way as toilet habits do. Sarosh’s desire to cease to be Sarosh and to become Sid
signifies a desire to become Canadian and thus a desire to obliterate the traces of his cultural difference. A similar case can be made with respect to toilet habits. For Sarosh a failure to defecate western style is equivalent to a failed immigration process. A new name and the wish to defecate like a Canadian express Sarosh’s yearning to die a symbolic death as an Indian as well as a wish to be reborn as a Canadian. His willingness to become Sid rejecting the old one (old identity) indicates that he is very much eager to acquire new identity, hence his inability to use the Western toilet in a Westernized way indicates that his umbilical cords are still rooted in the soil of his origin.

In Sarosh’s/Sid’s understanding, the processes of changing one’s name and one’s toilet habits are not equally easily accomplished. Changing the name is regarded to be easier than using a toilet Western style. The protagonist of the story believed defecating as a cultural practice more vital than naming. Sarosh/Sid identifies toilet habits with one’s core identity, while names connect to more marginal aspects of identity. Thus defecating and naming correspond to a view of identity that consists of an inside and an outside image of the self. Eventually *Squatter* deconstructs both names and toilet habits as convincing indicators of identity. By renaming himself, Sarosh assumes he has made progress in his assimilation to Canada. The changed name suggests the will to a new identity, and thus to a self-image that is firm and fixed. On the other hand, while there is no clue that the name Sid is rejected in Canada, the new name Sarosh has given him in a new land does not stick in the old. Nariman, the storyteller of the story refuses to recognize Sarosh’s new identity and continues to call him Sarosh: ‘This Sarosh began calling himself Sid after living in Toronto for a few months, but in our story he will be Sarosh and nothing but Sarosh, for that is his proper Parsi name’ (153). Nariman, who is connected with a different time and place, does not acknowledge his protagonist’s new name, thus rendering questionable the change of names/identities from Sarosh to Sid, i.e. from Indian to (Sarosh’s limited notion of what it means to be)
Canadian in the first place. Renaming as well as altering one’s toilet habits correspond to a construction of a new identity that is not truly lived, and thus will not be stable. Whereas the failure to defecate like a Westerner prevents a successful assimilation in the eyes of the protagonist, renaming proves especially deceptive. Misunderstood as a label rather than as a truthful reflection of one’s identity, renaming suggests an easy transition to another culture when in fact no substantial change has taken place. Sarosh’s fate demonstrates that Mistry’s metonymical mode of narration is farcical.

The story focuses on one apparent cultural practice, i.e. renaming, as compensation for another superficial cultural practice, i.e. defecating. Implicitly, Sarosh/Sid wants to shed his old identity because he regards a change of identity as a necessity for getting ahead in Canada. As the double entity Sarosh/Sid makes evident, the shedding of his identity is futile, the result of which is alienation and isolation. Culturally, he is alienated from the old without being able to adapt to the new. This is underlined once again by toilet habits: “There had been a time when it was perfectly natural to squat. Now it seemed a grotesquely aberrant thing to do” (162). The constant failure to use a toilet seat in an authentic western way results in feelings of shame and guilt: “Wherever he went he was reminded of the embarrassment of his way. If he could not be westernized in all respects, he was nothing but a failure” (162). Guilt and shame, which will also be of consequence in Lend Me Your Light, show that for Sarosh/Sid, cultural difference is not a resource but an burden: “He remained dependent on the old way, and this unalterable fact, strengthened afresh every morning of his life in the new country, suffocated him” (154). However, Sarosh’s/Sid’s inspection is not that of the story as a whole. The story does not rule out the possibility of a more positive perception on difference but plays off the destiny of its protagonist against the perspective of the story’s narrator.
Overlapping with the viewpoint of the story, Nariman’s narration overrides Sarosh’s inspection and, in diametrical opposition to the story’s protagonist, advocates difference not as embracement but as resource. When Nariman interprets Sarosh’s/Sid’s actions as the wish to adapt, he is in fact misguided. Sarosh does not want to become adapted, he wants to become assimilated, hence the inclination to become Sid. Assimilation, however, is at odds with the theoretical formulations of Canadian multiculturalism that imagine unity in diversity and allow the migrant to redefine himself on the basis of what he already is. In other words, multiculturalism does not require that Sarosh erases his old identity; in order to become Canadian, assimilation is no condition. On the contrary, Sarosh/Sid could have confined his cultural difference and would have fully qualified as Canadian. Sarosh/Sid overlooks that in a nation built by and consisting of immigrants, difference constitutes the core of national identity. By staying the way he had been, Sarosh would already have been as ‘Canadian’ as he could possibly become.

We discover more about Canada and multiculturalism through the story’s narrator. As a matter of fact, Nariman’s viewpoint on the multicultural society of Canadian is mocking; it is Swiftian in its grotesqueness. (Hable, 1993: 54) Sarosh gets through his immigrant aid Society that his dilemma could be resolved operationally. As Dr. No-Ilaaz explains:

‘A small device, Crappus Non Interruptus, or CNI as we call it, is implanted in the bowel. The device is controlled by an external handheld transmitter similar to the ones used for automatic garage door-openers – you may have seen them in hardware stores.’ ‘You can encode the handheld transmitter with a personal ten-digit code. Then all you do is position yourself on the toilet seat and activate your transmitter. Just like a garage door, your bowel will open without pushing or grunting. (160)
Use of this metaphorical speech in order to demonstrate the process of becoming Canadian, Nariman (as well as Mistry) questions a merely mechanistic view of identity-formation. The Canadian Dr. No-Ilaaz, who, notably, has not felt the essential to change his name on arriving in Canada, does not advocate the operation because he knows that the CNI will not turn the Parsi/Indian Sarosh into a Canadian Sid overnight. Defecating western style signifies an understanding of Canadian identity no less problematic than a mere change of names. Though the CNI can help Sarosh change his toilet habits, it does not make him less different. The unalterable implantation of the CNI will make him more Canadian only on the surface, while absolutely making him less Indian at heart. As Dr. No-Ilaaz puts it:

“You will be permanently different from your family and friends because of this basic internal modification. In fact, in this country or that, it will set you apart from your fellow countrymen.” (161)

It seems that For Sarosh difference does not become a tool for constructing an identity. Identity is not predicated by difference because the very character of difference is misunderstood by the protagonist of story. For even without having the CNI rooted difference for Sarosh/Sid understands as alienation wherever he migrates to. Squatter describes a circular trajectory that eventually makes Sarosh/Sid emigrate again, this time from Toronto to Bombay. At the end of the story, Sarosh, who has called himself Sid in Canada, wishes to be Sarosh again in India. But, as the narrator points out, a return is not possible: “The old pattern was never found by Sarosh; he searched in vain” (167). Although Sarosh has not become a Sid, he nevertheless is no longer the man he used to be. This is to say, he has unlearned to be an Indian Sarosh. Migration have led Sarosh/Sid nowhere and made him a victim of “a problematic relationship between interlocking cultural landscapes.” (Hable, 1993: 52) Instead of offering a new perception, migration has only brought about displacement, uprooting, alienation and “cultural dislocation.” Forsaking India
with the hope of finding a new home, Sarosh/Sid has privileged assimilation over adaptation. This is a mistake he pays for greatly by becoming enduringly Other, unable to turn any environment into home. Instead of having access to the best of both worlds, he no longer entirely belongs to either of them. That Sarosh/Sid always remains alienated wherever he locates himself emphasized once again by his toilet habits.

Only when he has boarded the flight for India is he able to sit on a toilet seat. In other words, only on the plane, i.e. technically neither in Canada nor in India, does he succeed in doing what he has tried to achieve in vain for ten years. The solution to his problem is located in a space that is neither ‘here’ nor ‘there.’ Thus ultimately the problem of the in-between is only resolved in the in-between, i.e. for Sarosh/Sid not resolved at all.

Sarosh/Sid can be regarded as a tragic hero, which is determined by the intertextual reference that the story ends with (168). Like Shakespeare’s Othello, Sarosh/Sid is unable to position himself in relation to a new environment. While Othello cannot internalize the values of Venice, Sarosh/Sid fails to cope with what he assumes to be the cultural conventions of the Canadian diaspora. By alluding to the requirements of classical tragedy, i.e. tragic flaw and dilemma, Mistry implicitly also suggests that Sarosh/Sid is to blame for his failure to make it in Canada as well as in India. It is neither Canada nor India that fails Sarosh/Sid but he himself that feels a failure on account of a distorted image of what both countries expect of him.

In nutshell, Squatter, although coming across as a report, is not a realist depiction of the migrant experience but depicts allegorical features. Nariman is not only the narrator but also the writer of Sarosh’s story, which can be seen as a story within a story. Nariman tells “the sad but instructive account of Sarosh’s recent life” (153) for a didactic purpose. The central insight he wants to present to Kersi, Viraf and Jehangir, i.e. those youths of Firozsha Baag most
eager to emigrate, does not relate to the impossibility of finding contentment abroad. It concerns cultural difference, as the dilemmas of the immigrant that cannot be denied because it is written on the body. Any attempt at trying to erase this difference will result in disappointment and uprooting. The point is that essential difference, i.e. difference written on the body, as explored by the story’s protagonist, is no tragedy; actually tragic is only the attempt to lose vision of one’s difference in a new land. Nariman invents a Sarosh/Sid in order to concern for those leaving their homeland against trying to lose sight of who they really are. And it is the reason why for Sarosh/Sid ‘life in the land of milk and honey was just a pain in the posterior’ (168) is that he has attempted to erase his identity as a Parsi: “Sarosh seems to want to forget his ethnic past, to efface his origins, and to lose his sense of identity by immersing himself in the western hegemonic culture.” (Hable, 1993: 54) A passion for (a mistaken because homogeneous conception of Canadian) identity overrides the fact that his identity is inevitably tied up with an awareness of difference. Nariman’s interpretation of cultural preservation differs from Sarosh’s/Sid’s in an important characteristic. He regards cultural difference as resource rather than as a burden, as liberating rather than restraining. As will be explored in more detail in the coming story about Canada, the immigration experience is treated somewhat differently.

*Lend Me Your Light* deals with alienation, too. The Parsis Jamshed, Percy and his brother Kersi are close friends until Kersi and Jamshed immigrate to North America. While Jamshed goes to the US, Kersi immigrates to Canada. Life in India, America, or Canada puts into question the characters’ approach towards cultural difference as a marker of identity that can either be rejected, or accepted, or result in uncertainty as to how to lead one’s life in a diaspora situation. The story considers in depth the question of the ethnic identity of immigrants and depicts the problems encountered by the Indian diaspora and sense of displacement and uprootedness by contrasting the lives of the two
friends – Jamshed and Kersi. While *Squatter* tells the story of a character who attempts to erase his Indian identity in order to assimilate, *Lend Me Your Light* focuses on a broader spectrum of ways to act in a new land. In short, *Lend Me Your Light* focuses on a continuum of three ways of coping with difference. In the words of Ajay Heble (1993):

Jamshed, who, scornful of his native India, 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, who comes to represent the struggle between the two extreme positions. (57)

Jamshed who is having very high ambitions, dreams of a dazzling future and material success, hates India and decides to migrate to America. He declares that one day he is going abroad to escape from the clutches of corruption in this country. For him Bombay is horrible, dirtier than ever. Percy Boyce leaves Bombay to work for the uplift of farmers in rural India. Percy’s brother Kersi, the narrator and the protagonist of the story, who migrates to Canada, seems to bind the two extreme positions. (Roy, 2001:17) That Jamshed assimilates to America easily is not surprising once it is taken into account that he is already alienated from India while living there. For Jamshed India is a backwards country ridden by corruption and crime and unable to change for the better. It is his passion that the problems of India are tied up with the so-called “ghati mentality” of country:

In the particular version of reality we inherited, ghatis were always flooding places, they never just went there. Ghatis were flooding the banks, desecrating the sanctity of institutions, and taking up all the coveted jobs. Ghatis were even flooding the colleges and universities, a thing unheard of. Wherever you turned, the bloody ghatis were flooding the place. (176)
When Jamshed talks regarding ghatis, i.e. about the members of a lower caste, the bedlam associated with them hints at his obsessed fear of an ensuing class struggle. The water imagery, so aptly ironised by Kersi above, suggests that the upper-class Jamshed links the social Other with a lumped working class target on depriving him of his riches. In much the same way as the individual is drowned in the mass, those who are well-off are threatened by lower castes/the working class. In that light, it is possible to argue that Jamshed accommodates to America so smoothly because the difference that he is afraid of is caste/class rather than race or culture. While caste/class is unmarked within US multiculturalism, it is money that enables him to assimilate to a capitalist America.

While Jamshed is still thinking about ‘ghati mentalities’ as an adult, both Kersi and Percy, on growing up, cease to be included in his complaints. The different development of the three of them with respect to their view points on caste is telling in its irony. While Jamshed continuously blames India of its backwardness, the story reveals that he has not matured as a person and thereby suggests that it is not India that is outside of time, progress etc. but he himself. While Kersi sees through the arrogance of Jamshed’s rhetoric in retrospect but fails to act, it is Percy who commits himself to challenging social injustice within India. Percy, as a character that remains behind and does not emigrate, implicitly testifies to the fact that India is not eternally depraved and corrupt but that things in India can be changed. Fighting the rural system of money-lending, Percy Boyce is not only the most audacious character in the story but also the one who practices the solidarity towards his fellow human beings suggested in the story’s epitaph by Tagore: “... 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).

Both Jamshed and Percy want to remove differences in their lives but they constitute them differently. While for the capitalist Jamshed it is America that
overrides ethnic as well as caste/class difference, the Marxist Percy works towards ameliorating the social inequities within India and thus actively fights social and class difference. Put differently, for Jamshed money and capitalism constitutes sameness, for Percy (as well as for Tagore) humanity is the central bond between individuals.

The clash between Jamshed’s skepticism and Percy’s optimism is mirrored in the conflict of ethics within Kersi. The protagonist and narrator of *Lend Me Your Light* experiences migration and diaspora as sources of guilt, which become evident in two ways. Comparing his situation to that of his brother, he reflects with a bad conscience:

“There you were, my brother, waging battles against corruption and evil, while I was watching sitcoms on my rented Granada TV” (184).

Kersi’s immigration has resulted in alienation from his brother, whose activism differentiates favorably with Kersi’s inability. Apart from a bad conscience due to his passivity, Kersi also experiences a feeling of guilt towards the culture he has left behind far. He puts a lot of efforts to recover the culture he has left behind prove to be disappointing. We observe Kersi in the middle of a process of adaptation. He lacks the distance to India in order to come to terms with what he has left behind. The result is that “Kersi inhabits the ambivalent space between cultures.” (Hable, 1993: 57) He is in-between cultures, a situation he does not experience as liberating but as crippling:’ Kersi sees his hybridized identity as the site of a struggle between opposing sets of cultural values.’ (Hable, 1993: 58) Utterly, he is need of a Nariman ordering his life for him and turning the chaos of migration and diaspora into a rational story. That the diaspora does not suggest Kersi a new vision but constitutes a serious handicap is also underlined by the story’s intertextual reference to Greek mythology. Before leaving for Toronto, Kersi, suffering from conjunctivitis, likens himself
to the blind seer Tiresias: “I, Tiresias, blind and throbbing between two lives, the one in Bombay and the one to come in Toronto” (180). The future tense with which Canada is associated allows the conclusion that Kersi does still anticipate for a hybrid identity that would permit him to selectively draw on the best of several worlds. At the end of the story, however, the tone of his discourse has become more pessimistic and notably bleaker. Eventually, Kersi characterizes himself in the following way: “I Tiresias, throbbing between two lives, humbled by the ambiguities and dichotomies confronting me” (192). The story’s intertextuality reflects Kersi’s failure to adapt and to cope with a fundamental conflict of values in the new land (Canadian diaspora). While the first of the two references to Greek mythology framing Lend Me Your Light still speaks of hope, the latter quotation merely registers that hopes have been thwarted.

As far as criticism has disregarded that Mistry does not quote Greek mythology directly. In Lend Me Your Light the reference of intertexts is mediated and thus acquires additional complexity. It is important to realize that Rohinton Mistry alludes to Greek mythology by taking recourse to T.S. Eliot who in the third section of The Waste Land has Tiresias speak the following words:

I, Tiresias, though blind, throbbing between two lives, Old man with wrinkled female breasts, can see. At the violet hour, the evening hour that strives Homeward, and brings the sailor home from sea… (Eliot, 1998: 62-3).

 Mentioning Eliot, Mistry draws Kersi’s comparison to the ancient seer as inadequate. Kersi is no second Tiresias because his transitory blindness does not result in a new kind of vision that would enable him to envisage the future. Although Kersi Boyce may lead two lives, the result is not a double vision but schizophrenia, failure to adapt and, in fact, blindness. As a man temporarily displaying characteristics of both sexes as well as moving between the world
and the underworld, Eliot’s Tiresias is a man of the in-between who has received the gift of prophecy as compensation for the blindness he has been struck with. In fact, his hybridity is so valuable for the gods that they endow him with the ability to see into the future. Kersi on the other hand, merely suffers from his hybridity in the mundane, post-religious sphere of the diaspora. He cannot make out the sailor coming home (i.e. Ulysses) whom Tiresias in Eliot’s poem speaks of, for he himself is on an Odyssee, i.e. sentenced to wander the earth in search of a home. Kersi’s failure to perceive the sailor is a failure to evaluate his situation in Canada as someone who is essentially homeless. (Leckie, 1996: 31)

In the context of the story’s intertextuality, the symbolism of *Lend me Your Light* also acquires an additional layer of meaning. For the light imagery of *Lend Me Your Light* does not only allude to Jamshed’s moral darkness juxtaposed to Percy’s qualities as light bringer; *Lend Me Your Light* also employs light imagery to underline its concern with vision and seeing. Thus the request for light signaled by the title is not only a demand for solidarity and humanism but also a desire and a will to truth. While the homeland in *Lend Me Your Light* grants Percy the satisfaction of finding meaning in life by helping others with a “non-usurious lending of light” (Malak, 1988: 194) the diaspora does not allow the migrant Kersi the ‘insight’ needed to come to terms with his hybrid existence: No “lucidity of thought”, no “clearness with which to look at things” (186), “the epiphany would have to wait for another time” (192). How Kersi eventually arrives at an epiphany that sheds light on how an acceptable Canadian identity might be envisaged, is detailed by Mistry in *Swimming Lessons*, the final and most interesting story of his collection.

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

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

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

At the closing of the story, *Swimming Lessons*, the narrator, a young writer, observes an old man in his Toronto apartment block staring mutely at the flakes of snow falling outside. He muses:

What thoughts is he thinking as he watches them? Of childhood days, perhaps, and snowmen with hats and pipes, and snowball
fights, and white Christmases, and Christmas trees? What will I think of, old in this country, when I sit and watch the snow come down? … my snowmen and snowball fights and Christmas trees are in the pages of Enid Blyton’s books, dispersed amidst the adventures of the Famous Five, and the Five Find-Outers, and the Secret Seven. My snowflakes are even less forgettable than the old man’s, for they never melt. (244)

This redolent passage captures the poignant enigma of the displacement forged in one culture and location but indebted to grapple in language with the everyday realities of another. It is appealing to see reflected here the position of its author, Mistry, born in Bombay, now resident in Canada, but continually prowling the cupboards of memory for the dusty but overt remnants of the India he has left behind. Hitherto the last sentence also suggests an increased intensity to the experiences of a childhood stretched by space as well as time: as if the migrant writer is empowered by that very geographical separation to fashion images with the sharpness of cut crystal, which will throw a new, diffused light on the familiarities of ‘home’, as well as on the eccentricities of elsewhere. Mistry’s work as a whole, with its repeated image of journeys of different kinds, combines ‘the lore of faraway places, such as a much-traveled man brings home, with the lore of the past, as it best reveals itself to nation of a place.

Once again at the centre of Swimming Lessons, the most complex story of Mistry’s Tales From Firozsha Baag, is Kersi Boyce. Initially, his position in the new world is marked by his association with the old. Living in Toronto, Bombay is nevertheless constantly on Kersi’s mind. This dichotomy informs the structure of the story as one alternating between ‘here’ and ‘there.’(Bharuch, 2003: 61) Although, in the course of the story, Kersi undergoes a transformation from an immigrant who is obsessed with the past and the culture left behind to someone who makes a conscious effort to come to
terms with the social reality of Canada. In this story, Kersi’s focus is both on the produced home and community in Canada and on the home he has left behind in India. In other words, he foregrounds the conservative image of the Eastern man in the eyes of the West. His self-image alters because he has been identified as the ‘other’ in the emigrated other land. The irritated question of identity in the Indian diaspora is further convoluted in the context of Canada.

Detaching older concept of culture, identity and difference, he becomes able to give up the distance he has previously maintained towards Canadian society. Rohinton Mistry focuses on multiculturalism by drawing on the image of the house as microcosm exploring the situation of Canadian society at large. Swimming Lessons is set in a block of flats in Toronto that resembles Bombay’s Firozsha Baag. Both buildings are peopled by a variety of ethnicities. In Bombay, Muslims and Goans live among Parsis, and in Toronto, Scottish, Slavic and Indian/Parsi immigrants live together. However, their co-existence, though peaceful, is not free from hostility. What is striking about the block of flats in Toronto (in contrast to Firozsha Baag) is that Kersi, on the whole, hardly knows anyone of his neighbors by his/her name. The people living side by side with him are merely “the old man” (229), “the old man’s son” (243), “the Portuguese woman”, or “PW” (230), “Berthe’s husband” (237), “two women” (232), one of them identified by her Scottish accent. Not only does Kersi refer to people by way of their language, he also refers to them by way of their function, e.g. PW as the disseminator of information, “the communicator for the apartment building” (230), or their outward appearance. Thus the woman that he fancies during one of his swimming lessons is merely “the pink one-piece suit” (238). Kersi Boyce does not admit the individuality of the persons around him; he simply refers to them metonymically. However, taking recourse to metonymy and synecdoche is pinpointing of an amount of anonymity within his life that is worrying. Not only does it make a point about
the lack of harmony among immigrants in Toronto it also reveals Kersi’s problematic attitude towards his host society. As McElwain (1994) points out:

His multicultural neighbors symbolize Canada’s multiculturalism, and his distance from them symbolizes his distance from his adopted country. [ . . . ] His failure to get to know his neighbors reflects his failure to get to know Canada. (18)

That Kersi’ sees Canada as reductive and he confirms this by the following passage in which he imagines:

a gorgeous woman in the class for non-swimmers, at whose sight I will be instantly aroused, and she, spying the shape of my desire, will look me straight in the eye with her intentions; she will come home with me, to taste the pleasures of my delectable Asian brown body whose strangeness has intrigued her and unleashed uncontrollable surges of passion inside her throughout the duration of the swimming lesson. (235-6)

Kersi sexual fantasy is fascinating for two reasons. First of all, sexuality here and elsewhere in the story is not connected to love or aspiration but is related to dishonesty. Illusion and disillusionment both result from untrustworthy degrees of distance that the protagonist Kersi maintains towards the objects of his fantasy. The greater the distance, the more probable it generally is that the object of his wish spawns another fantasy in his mind. The farther away and the more removed Kersi feels, the more sexist do his sexual fantasies become. Reducing distance, on the other hand, brings about disappointment and thus a more realist attitude towards people and society. With respect to social relations, Swimming Lessons could be said to move from more to less distance.
Thus at the end of the story Kersi will have learned that “you can’t see things clearly until you get close to them.” (McElwain, 1994: 19)

Secondly, the real perversity of Kersi’s fantasy mentioned above is not so much his sexism but the fact that he imagines himself as the exotic and sexually compelling Asian. He downplays his cultural difference as a Parsi while simultaneously foregrounding the stereotypical image of the Easterner in the eyes of the West. The identity Kersi acquires relies on a racialist understanding of Otherness that discards the complexity of the individual. As such, Kersi’s self-image reflects an inferiority complex that is Fanonian in its dimensions. His sexuality displays traits of neurosis because his self-image is distorted. (McElwain, 1994: 18) It might be said that his self-image has been unsettled because he has been victimised as Other.

For *Swimming Lessons* as a story dealing with the confusion of the migrant by frequently referring to a uncertainty of cause and effect, the allusion is that there is a connection between Canada’s racism and Kersi’s racialism. His self-image is fuzzy because Canada does not allow for difference beyond stereotypes. In other words, although Kersi is to be blamed for the undue distance he maintains towards the inhabitants of his house and, by extension, to Canada in general, he also suffers from a multiculturalism that displays shortcomings. Kersi does not adapt because he maintains his distance, and he maintains his distance because he is discriminated against and because he wants to be different. That he does not want to adapt is not only revealed by the anonymity that characterizes his life world. It becomes apparent, too, during one of his swimming lessons:

> This instructor is an irresponsible person. Or he does not value the lives of nonwhite immigrants. I remember the three teenagers. Maybe the swimming-pool is the hangout of some racist group,
bent on eliminating all non-white swimmers, to keep their waters pure and their white sisters unogled. (239)

While Kersi has been discriminated against by the racism of the three boys, his instructor clearly does not have racism in mind when he relies on moderate pressure in trying to teach him to swim. Symbolically, Kersi’s fear to adapt to Canada figures as fear of water. However, in an act of overcompensation the instructor is blamed by Kersi for his own failure to adapt to Canada. Kersi’s inability to cope with difference is displaced onto Ron and the inability to cope with difference he is unjustly accused of. Racism is invoked because Kersi is unable yet to think beyond a notion of difference that is not racialist/racist.

Learning how to swim translates as learning how to cope up in new surroundings. “Swimming is a metaphor for assimilating in the story, and both his fear of water and his dwindling efforts in his lessons symbolize his unwillingness and inability to commit to Canada.” (McElwain, 1994: 20) Water testifies to the complexity of the emigrant/immigrant experience by symbolizing death and rebirth. The emphasis is on movement, the difficulties experienced in learning to swim metaphorically allude to the difficulties of getting ahead in an environment that is as alien to the non-swimmer as the element of water is to the element of earth. While swimming and water are charged with symbolic significance in Mistry’s tale, the representation of his failure to swim is symbolical, too. Kersi has not become Canadian because he has failed to position himself with respect to those surrounding him in multicultural Toronto. Metaphorically speaking, he has not learned how to swim. At the same time, Kersi’s failure to adapt results from “ties to the past too strong to enable him to connect with the present.” (McElwain, 1994: 17) He is obsessed with the past and is preoccupied with remembering and comparing.
The distance towards the new is merely the other side of a past that haunts the protagonist. Two examples may corroborate this: First of all, Kersi’s distance towards the new becomes evident when he is unable to identify trees other than maples (241), thus testifying to a rather theoretical knowledge about Canada that seems to be learned by heart for an interview with the Canadian immigration authorities. Kersi’s notion of Canadian identity is not only purely academic but also superficial as well as cliched. Knowledge about his host country remains within the realm of the symbolic, the explanatory value of which is low.

Secondly, Kersi’s affiliation with the old becomes obvious when in the course of a commotion in the court of his block of flats he involuntarily associates the old country: “Maybe the old man is not well, it’s an emergency. But I quickly scrap that thought – this isn’t Bombay, an ambulance would have arrived” (242). Bombay is still so much of a reality that it surfaces time and again in the mind of Kersi when things in the outside world call for an explanation. As McElwain (1994) suggest: “Geographical separation intensifies memories; it does not lead to emotional separation,” (18) something which is also underscored by the form of the story.

The form of *Swimming Lessons* mirrors Kersi’s continuing relationship to India. The structure of the story as one alternating between Toronto and Bombay is significant for an interpretation of *Swimming Lessons*. While in Toronto, Kersi remembers Bombay, his parents in Bombay worry about him in Toronto because they fear that he will become alienated from his cultural roots (236). On the one hand, Kersi’s parents wait for his letters and read what he writes about Toronto. Eventually, they receive stories instead of letters, a medium that conveys Kersi’s experience in Canada in less superficial terms and testifies that he has not forgotten India at all. His ties to his homeland are arguably too strong, and difference seems an impediment in his process of adaptation to Canada. On the other hand, we never observe Kersi read what his
parents write. Thus the communication with his parents is not only delayed and indirect but also appears one-sided and asymmetrical. This means that the ties to India, although still intact, are no longer characterized by an active engagement with the country of his origins. It is only memories that connect him to the past. Kersi, who has not adapted to Canada yet, is not fully part of India anymore either. He is in-between cultures, i.e. he does not fully belong to either the new or the old world.

Swimming Lessons is Mistry’s most complex narrative in an aesthetically rather traditional oeuvre. In particular, the complexity of the story consists in its playing off postmodern thought. Swimming Lessons becomes an autobiographical story when one day Kersi’s parents are sent a collection of short stories that turns out to be Tales From Firozsha Baag (241). Thus in a self-conscious move the distinction between writer and narrator is lifted and Kersi is identified with Rohinton Mistry. Kersi like Mistry attempts to deal with the past by remembering it. While the reader is in the same position as Kersi’s parents and needs to make sense about his immigrant experience by reading about it, both Kersi and Mistry come to terms with the past by writing about it.

Writing is an important activity in Swimming Lessons. Partaking of postmodernist discourse also in other respects, “Swimming Lessons” displays characteristics of met fiction, i.e. fiction that self-reflexively makes the conditions of its production and reception part of the act of narration. (Linda Hutcheon, 2000:105-24) Thus Kersi’s parents constantly engage in poetological speculations about remembering and artistic distance. In this context they also mimic an argument often voiced by critics of Canadian immigrant literature: Canada is indispensable in laying to rest the past and is needed as a space removed that enables the writer to work through his experiences in a colonial/postcolonial land. Observe, for example, Kersi’s father lecturing on literary theory:
Father explained it takes a writer about ten years time after an experience before he is able to use it in his writing, it takes that long to be absorbed internally and understood, thought out and thought about, over and over again, he haunts it and it haunts him if it is valuable enough, till the writer is comfortable with it to be able to use it as he wants; but this is only one theory I read somewhere, it may or may not be true. That means, said Mother, that his childhood in Bombay and our home here is the most valuable thing in his life just now, because he is able to remember it all to write about it, and you were so bitterly saying he is forgetting where he came from; and that may be true, said Father, but that is not what the theory means, according to the theory he is writing of these things because they are far enough in the past for him to deal with it objectively, he is able to achieve what critics call artistic distance, without emotions interfering. (246)

Writing is of special relevance for a discussion of difference in *Swimming Lessons* too. The distance that is so problematic for Kersi because it allegedly impedes his adaptation to Canada proves useful in one important respect: It benefits the production of fiction/literature. (McElwain, 1994: 24-5.) According to Kersi’s father it is crucial for Kersi as a writer not to lose his cultural difference because this difference will produce the aesthetically different:

The last story i.e. *Swimming Lessons* they liked the best of all because it had the most in it about Canada, and now they felt they knew at least a little bit, even if it was a very little bit, about his day-to-day life in his apartment; and Father said if he continues to write about such things he will become popular because I am sure they are interested there in reading about life through the eyes of an immigrant, it provides a different viewpoint; the only danger is
if he changes and becomes so much like them that he will write
like one of them and lose the important difference. (248)

While Kersi’s father argues that aesthetic difference will be valued as artistic
originality and thus sell, Kersi’s story also testifies that cultural difference
outside the realm of literature is psychologically as well as sociologically
troublesome. Although the form of “Swimming Lessons” with its fragments
alternately set in India and Canada might be read as a valuable reflection of
Kersi’s difference,(Malak, 1988: 189) the story’s oscillation between ‘there’
and ‘here,’ i.e. its dichotomous imagination, could also be read as mirroring the
protagonist’s uprooting and disorientation. The irony of Swimming Lessons
would then be that art and life beg to differ about the usefulness of cultural
difference and social distance. Difference, understood as unwillingness to
engage with society, is a shortcoming on the protagonist’s part that is not
successfully grappled with until the very end of the story. Maintaining “the
important difference,” as Kersi’s father demands, is not an alternative
categorically ruled out by the story; it is the way difference is lived that is at the
centre of Swimming Lessons and that the story criticizes in its protagonist. The
end of Mistry’s story sees the conflict between (difference/distance in) art and
(difference/distance in) life about to be resolved. As the cycle of seasons in the
(symbolic) time scheme of Swimming Lessons indicates, the winter of
discontent gives way to a spring that indicates spiritual regeneration. That some
form of regeneration, or rebirth, as the water imagery of the story insinuates,
has been accomplished is signaled by Kersi Boyce’s new attempt at learning to
swim as well as by the fact that he asks his fellow inhabitants for their names
and makes an effort at identifying more trees than maples (248-9).

Swimming Lessons implies that Kersi’s altered attitude towards Canada results
from his having worked through his past artistically. While art and life have
different views of cultural difference, both are connected. Life needs art to
become liveable. The artistic exploration of the self is a prerequisite to Kersi’s
introspection signaled by his bathtub baptism: “The world outside the water I have seen a lot of, it is now time to see what is inside” (249). In accord with Mistry’s extended water metaphor, being able to see underwater signals a willingness to engage with Canada and a new vision of its multicultural society. At the end of the story, Kersi Boyce sees life in “dual perspective.” (Bharucha, 2003: 61) Henceforth he will make a new effort at overcoming solipsism and inwardness in life and exchange a superficial and half-hearted attitude towards multiculturalism for genuine cultural interaction. Ethnic difference does no longer figure as distance and passivity, the emphasis is not on relinquishing but on “integrating his ethnic difference into the sameness of a Western cultural mainstream.” (Hable, 1993: 60) Kersi can become a full-fledged Canadian once he “unsettles the terms of sameness and difference, insisting on his full citizenship even while he explodes the idea of national belonging.” (Samantrai, 1995: 48)

It is very much clear that the story is deliberately positioned at the end of Tales From Firozsha Baag, all the other stories may be read as preliminary attempts of Mistry searching for a new self-image in a new land. Writing a cycle culminating in the autobiographical Swimming Lessons, it is Mistry himself who makes an ardent claim for a balanced attitude towards identity construction in the diaspora. In its authoritativeness Swimming Lessons therefore overrides the pessimism of Squatter and Lend Me Your Light. Displacement can be challenged by complementing cultural difference and indigenous tradition by a general openness to new cultural influences. The stories see that the identity is always a complicated issue. Each of the protagonists of the stories tried to assimilate in the new soil but it was unattainable for them to cease their old image (identity).

Auspicious Occasion presents us the crumbling world of Firozsha Baag. It introduces us to the narrow-minded, tradition-bound world of Bombay’s Parsi community, as Rustomji and his wife Mehroo and they are preparing for the
important Behram roje celebrations. Rustomji is sixteen years her senior and already wearing dentures. He pretends indifference to the ceremonies which his wife is performing, but secretly enjoys the occasions as such festivals allows him to display certain elements such as Behram roje allow, as he dons the ceremonial Parsi dress which marks him out as different from the predominantly Hindu India that surrounds him. It can be interpreted that dress symbolizes the marker of their culture.

The story begins with the couple preparing for their visit to the fire temple. The rituals, customs and superstitions surrounding this most auspicious occasion – the concern that everything be just right and to avoid unwanted distractions – signifies the central challenge facing the Parsis in the modern world: how to balance the requirements of tradition and culture with the need for change to keep up with modernity. The retrospective urge, which in the Parsis is often linked to anglophilia and which the story reveals to be central to Parsi identity in postcolonial India, is symbolized by Rustomji’s lament that two of Britain’s most precious legacies, Lifebuoy Soap and Johnnie Walker Scotch, are now only accessible in the black market. If Rustomji is, to a certain extent, living in the past it also seems that the Baag itself has seen better days. The building is decaying deficiently. Their flat bears the imprint of last year’s rains in soggy patches on the walls and, much to Rustomji’s chagrin, the upstairs toilet is leaking in a steady drip that disturbs his morning motion. As someone who values reliability of all kinds he is disturbed by the drops of water which spatter his head, befouling him on a day which demands from the faithful a particular attention to purity.

The Parsi community is separated from its surrounding is represented most vividly by the use of color white. The couple’s special attire – his dugli and her sari – is spotlessly white. Whiteness here operates as both a traditional symbol of purity prescribed by religion and also the significant marker of their ethnic identity, but also a visual signifier of the attempt to remain unsoiled by the
bustling, chaotic spin of humanity that is Bombay. Rustomji in particular relishes the elegance of his white dugli, his peripheral fastidiousness an indicator of self-image. We see that on his way to the fire temple, ‘he decided to pass the H route bus stop and walk further, to the A-1 Express, past Tar Gully and its menacing mouth. His starchy whiteness aroused in him feelings of resplendence and invincibility, and he had no objection to the viewing of his progress by the street’ (16). Suitably reinforced Rustomji pushes his way to the front of the bus queue. However, his composure is about to be shattered. As he descends from the bus a paan-chewing mouth from the upper deck emits a stream of red juice which catches him ‘between the shoulder blades:

    blood red on sparkling white’, sending him into a paroxysm of rage, and he starts ‘screaming as painfully as though it was a knife in the back’ (17).

Rustomji vents his anger on the probing crowd which has gathered around, drawn by his bellowing, berating them as ‘sisterfucking ghatis’. But the mood of the crowd quickly changes and Rustomji is manhandled, threatened with violence and has his festival finery pulled off in a symbolic disrobing. In immediate danger from the angry mob he hits on the only escape strategy available, one that punctures the assumed stance of superiority he has so carefully been cultivating all morning. As sometimes happens in a school playground, so here the weaker party escapes through comedy and self-mockery. He spits out his dentures:

    ‘The collapsed mouth and flapping lips appeased everyone. A general tittering spread through the assembly. Rustomji the clown was triumphant. He had restored to himself the harmlessness of the original entertaining spectacle’ (18).
Quoting this passage Mistry seems consciously reworking the well-known stereotype of the Parsi bawaji, beloved of Indian film directors for generations. Tanya Luhrmann (1996) describes how this figure is typically ‘an old, eccentric man, the kind of elderly man who needs to get off the bus, battling his way to the door, at exactly the wrong moment for everyone’, while Nilufer Bharucha (1996) considers this incident as symbolizing ‘the social decline of the “Bawaji”, who in the British Raj was a “sahib”, but has now become a figure of fun; somebody who can be spat upon with impunity’. Again this incident represents the displaced condition of community. Meanwhile, Mehroo went to the fire temple ahead of her husband but there she found the gate closed and police were handling the situation. It shows that the priest, Dustoor Dhunjisha, has been murdered, ‘stabbed in the back’ by an attendant at the fire temple whom he had caught in an attempted theft. Of course the phrase ‘stabbed in the back’ takes on a figurative as well as a literal dimension in this context: the real horror is that Dustoor Dhunjisha has been murdered by a fellow Parsi: the ultimate betrayal for a struggling minority. Suddenly, a sense of moral and communal decay is added to the personal decay of the aging Rustomji and the structural decay of the Baag buildings. Returning home disconsolately, Mehroo suffers another shock when, on entering, she spies her husband’s discarded paan-stained dugli and misinterprets it for the bloodstained vestments of the murdered dustoor. In this symbolic misrecognition, Rustomji is momentarily conflated with the dead priest, accentuating the sense of a community under attack from elements in the uncomprehending outside world and, more ominously, from uncontrollable forces within. *Auspicious Occasion* strongly conveys the Parsis’ internalized sense of siege as a marginal entity in a populous Hindu nation. It also suggests the later struggles by the next generation to break free from the stifling boundaries of what the text depicts as an introverted and prejudiced, if severely loyal, community.
The next story *One Sunday* depicts the feature of security that derives from repetition and routine. Here the predictable events of an ordinary Sunday, on which the middle-aged widow Najamai goes to visit her sister’s family in Bandra, leaving her upstairs flat in the care of her neighbor, are upset by the alleged theft of eighty rupees. The prime suspect is the local odd-job man, Francis, who sleeps under the awning of a nearby shop, waiting to assist any of the Baag residents for the sake of a few *paise*, and whom the Parsis consider ‘really no better than a homeless beggar’ (30).

The story *One Sunday* centers on the notion of the Parsis as subalterns, but seen as privileged, by those even more subaltern in the Indian social order. This story thoroughly reveals the agony and the anxiety that the Parsi community experiences when it feels itself threatened by an outsider, even when there is no menace and the very idea of the outsider seems strange. Mistry makes a comment on the discrimination of Francis, the odd-job man in Firozsha Baag, chased by the entire Parsi colony for a petty theft he commits to feed his starvation. It is precisely the fear of the ‘other’ that haunts many Parsis today. “Though the Parsi community fruitfully adapted in India their ‘Chosen Land’, the Westernized Parsi continues to regard themselves as aliens, representing the ‘other’. A strong feeling that they are ‘marginalized’ in the Indian society pervades the life of the westernized Parsi community” (Somalatha, 2008: 116)

The fact that majority of Parsis are not rich. Hence it was not possible for them to have access to upper middle class domestic conveniences like refrigerators. This was especially true in 1960s and 70s. This is apparent in this story where a very few of the tenants of Firozsha Baag owned a refrigerator. One such fortunate fridge-owner was Najamai Tehmina, who lived alone, mainly used the fridge and the Boyce family, made a more extensive use of the fridge and stored their weekly supply of beef in the freezer compartment, neatly divided into seven packets. Unlike the Hindus most Parsis eat beef, even though the
cow is sacred to both the religions. Also, beef is cheaper than mutton and hence more within the reach of poorer Parsis like the Boyce.

“In Tar Gully (Lane), where the really destitute of Bombay lived, the bat-wielding Parsi boys were unwelcome. They were resented as representing the race that considered it superior to them. The term ‘ghaati’ is a descriptive term for people who live in the Western ghats, but as used by the Parsis, acquires a pejorative sense and generally means an uncouth, barbaric person” (Bharucha, 2003: 80). From this we can understand the place of Parsis in post colonial India.

The next tale *Ghost of Firozsha Baag* is told in the first person by the Goanese ayah of a professional Parsi couple who live upstairs in B Block. But as a devout Catholic, as well as a servant, Jacqueline (whose name is corrupted to Jaakaylee by Parsi mispronunciation) is, like Francis, something of an outsider even with her forty-nine years of service. She understands how ayahs live close to the floor, grinding *masala* and chopping vegetables. Considerably, after attending midnight household duties, Jaakaylee sleeps outside the flat, by the stairs, so as not to disturb her employers. It is here she witnesses the first appearance of the ghost of Firozsha Baag. One of the most prominent features of Jakaylee’s narration is the vernacular style and her use and integration of languages. Mistry captures the register of the half-educated, aging Goan servant as she laments in her idiosyncratic English, ‘Nowadays my weight is much more than it used to be, and is getting very difficult for me to get up from floor. But I am managing’ (45). Her narrative is striking by untranslated words from Gujarati and Hindi, which puncture the stilted English, not simply adding ‘local colour’, but signifying ‘a definite cultural experience which they cannot hope to reproduce but whose difference is validated by the new situation’. Jaakaylee recalls the process by which she was renamed:
All the fault is of old *bai* who died ten years ago … Old *bai* took English words and made them Parsi words. Easy chair was *igeechur*, French beans was *ferach beech*, and Jacqueline became Jaakaylee. Later I found that all old Parsis did this, it was like they made their own private language … I don’t care about it now. If someone asks my name I say Jaakaylee. And I talk Parsi-Gujarati all the time instead of Konkani, even with other ayahs. Sometimes also little bits of English. (44)

At the same time, we get the idea of Jaakaylee's narration of her life story, we get the feeling that, even with the ayah's prejudices about the Parsis, she has been transformed by the very culture she thinks herself as being an outsider to, just as she herself has exerted an influence, no matter how small, on the cultural life of her Parsi employers. For one, Jaakaylee's hot Goan curries have replaced the Parsi dhansak as the Karanis' favourite dish. With this, the space of the Karani household and, by extension, that of Firozsha Baag, becomes a metaphor for the changing configurations of Parsi cultural identity. There is undoubtedly a degree of alienation in this for Jaakaylee – she laments 'Forgetting my name, my language, my songs' (45) – but her experience can also be seen as part of that cosmopolitan mixing resulting from the influx into Bombay in the 1950s and 1960s, which included ‘Tamils and Keralites, with their funny *illay illay poe poe* language’ (46). Jaakaylee felt that she was lucky to have been accepted by a Parsi household as they normally preferred lighter-skinned ayahs from Mangalore. She says,

> Parsis prefer Manglorean Catholics, they have light skin colour. For themselves also Parsis like light skin, and when Parsi baby is born that is the first and most important thing…. But if it is dark skin they say, arré what is this ayah no chhokro, ayah’s child.

(52-53)
The colour discrimination exhibited by the Parsis was also echoed by the subalterns from Tar Gully and cries of ‘Blackie, Blackie’ (53) followed Jaakaylee whenever she went shopping there. Mistry’s tale is a subtle excavate at the Parsi notion of racial purity. The story focuses on the marginal condition of Jaakaylee. Also she is alienated from her own culture which threatens her identity as well.

“Bai’s word for having seen a spectral creature, being weightier than Jaakaylee’s could ever be serious measures is taken to rid ‘c’ block of the apparition. Parsi priests are summoned and prayers chanted to scarce away the evil spirit” (Bharucha, 2003: 86). The story takes a weird turn with the two women exhibiting female harmony and trying to summon the ghost by using a cane winnower, in an interesting combination of Parsi and Goan folk lore and superstition.

The rituals and customs of Parsis in this collection of stories, which began with Behram roje and visits of agiaries is now extended to funeral rites in the story entitled Condolence Visit. The story recounts the cultural and ritualistic aspects of the Parsi identity. The story details the zoroastrian rituals and customs concern with the funeral ceremony. The story is a distinguished and truly tragic in its tone as its main protagonist, the newly widowed Daulat Mirza. Following the Parsi custom, friends and relatives were expected to pay a condolence visit to the bereft family. These visits in the time-honoured manner would begin after the dusmoo or the tenth day ceremonies in honour of the departed soul. Some more tactful persons would hold back till after the masisa or the first month anniversary. However, the majority would start streaming in after the dusmoo. So, Daulat in a very sensible fashion begins to prepare for this arrival. Daulat’s neighbour Najamai offers to help out by lending her chairs and glasses to cope with the flow of visitors. Najamai like several ageing Parsis in Bombay had Children who lived abroad and rarely visited home.
Secondly the story deals with the question of superstition and blind dogma that besets the Parsi Zoroastrian community. This matter had been considered within the context of the supernatural elements in this story. The main focus is on superstitions and rituals connected with death and funeral rites. Daulat Mirza in spite of her grief-stricken condition stands up bravely to the demands made upon her by canon and ritual prescribed by ‘concerned’ society and neighbours. According to Parsi orthodoxy, the lamp should be extinguished after the fourth day – Charam ceremonies. This would enable the soul to sever ties with this world and go quickly to the Next World” (Bharucha, 2003: 88). Najamai advised,

...quickly-quickly go to the Next World. With the lamp still burning the soul will be attracted to two different places: here and the Next World. So you must put it out, you are confusing the soul … (75)

Daulat gets affected by hostility of the society and she shuts the bedroom door so that the burning lamp would not offend the eyes of the orthodox. She does not put out the contentious lamp. The central symbol in the story is the pugree of Minocher which connects the past and present. Daulat sorts out Minocher’s clothes for giving away to charity. “Among the items she sorts out is Minocher’s pugree, the tall, black hat worn by Parsi men on ceremonial occasions such as weddings and navjotes. Minocher’s pugree was a particularly splendid specimen and well-preserved. Young Parsi men no long wore pugrees at their wedding and new ones were thus not manufactured any more. This made Minocher’s pugree an antique piece and rather valuable” (Bharucha, 2003: 88-89). The opportune reading of a small advertisement in the Parsi newspaper – Jam-e-Jamshed – where the advertiser wanted just such a pugree made. Daulat call him up, in a hope that Minocher’s pugree would find a fitting home. This little by-play allows Mistry to offer his usual understand comment on the jettisoning of traditions and traditional grab by present day Parsis. This
incident indicates that parsis are concerned with the preservation of their culture by doing so they are trying to make their culture alive.

Daulat’s decision to handover her husband’s pugree to the young man is, in reality, a bid to keep Parsi custom alive. The pugree stands for a rich Parsi tradition which modern young Parsi refuses to carry on. The young man, who volunteers to buy the pugree, is traditional in dress as well as in outlook. He says, “Mrs. Mirza is selling Mr. Mirza’s pugree to me... In correct Parsi dress and all.” (87) The gesture of a true Parsi, though he is a stranger to her, brings relief to Daulat. She tells him, “But let me tell you, my Minocher would be happy to give it to you if he were here ... so if you want it, take it today.” (89)

In almost mock-tragic manner this woman – Moti, falls upon Daulat’s neck reeking of eau de cologne (perfume), is indicator of loud cries of distress. The eau de cologne is incidentally a nearly indivisible part of the toilette of Parsi woman of a certain age. This cologne is normally connected with the sick room and in the Parsi psyche. A Parsi patient is often soothed by the prudent application of a little eau de cologne on his/her forehead. A Parsi corpse is kept smelling fragrant by liberal sprinklings of this perfumed water.

“At Parsi funerals, a corpse bearer or junior priest sits by the corpse with a big bottle of eau de cologne, and his only role in the ceremony is to periodically sprinkle it over the body.”
(Bharucha, 2003: 89)

For this reason, it was the most appropriate fragrance to be worn on a condolence visit. Thus in this story, Mistry gives a vivid picture of middle class Parsi life: their culture, customs and rituals. He does not mock at the Parsi customs, though he is an expatriate. His treatment of Parsi life is sympathetic to a high degree. It seems that author’s own feelings towards the Zoroastrian faith is manifested through this story.
“In The Collectors, the narrative mode is explicitly ironic. From the beginning there is noteworthy temporal fluidity in the narrative: a leakage of the ‘present-of narration’ into the ‘past-being-narrated’ in the story. This shows a greater degree of sophistication on the part of the narrator, whose identity is not manifested yet from us at this stage. We are made aware of this as a retrospective narrative, partly through the reducing temporality of the second paragraph, recalling Rushdie’s helter-skelter, barely controlled time in Midnight’s Children and Shame. We are told of the things Dr Mody did not know at the time of his arrival in Firozsha Baag:

Dr Mody did not know it then, but he would be seeing a lot of Jehangir, the Bulsara boy; the boy who sat silent and brooding every evening, watching the others at play … Or that just when he would think he had found someone to share his hobby with, someone to mitigate the perpetual disappointment about his son Pesi, he would lose his precious Spanish dancing-lady stamp and renounce Jehangir’s friendship, both in quick succession. And then two years later, he himself would – but that is never knowable. (79)

This story reveals Mistry’s intense insight into the nature of human affections, and the way in which a man’s life and destiny are closely interconnected with them. Mistry depicts the boredom and languor of the Parsi community living in a ‘Baag’, far removed from the realities of outside world. The two protagonists in the story, Jehangir and Pesi, also appeared in the later stories, are drawn as foils to each other. Dr. Mody’s zeal for stamps is a survival-strategy: it is a desperate bid to conquer ennui which characterizes life in Firozsha Baag” (Somalatha, 1995: 117). The philately passion of Dr. Mody is symbolic. It symbolizes his concern for his own community. Jehangir is popularly known as “Bulsara Bookworm” by his friends. Jehangir’s philately concern was encouraged by Dr. Mody and this made his jealous of the fact that her husband
spent most of the time with the Bulsara boy and disregard their own son, Pesi. Mrs. Mody creates doubt on Jehangir about the Spanish dancing lady stamp, but after the death of Mr. Mody, she feels guilty for what she did and gave the entire collection to Jehangir. By this time Jehangir, loses his passion regarding stamps. He takes the collection to home and puts it under the bed. Soon cockroaches and white ants obliterate the entire collection. He feels neither happy nor sad – only relief. In this story, Jehangir’s self is discovered through the exorcism of the past and the reception of the present. The story suggests the mental belongings carried by individuals in their collection of experiences, feelings, memories, nostalgia and in particular for the Parsis.

*Of White Hairs and Cricket* is a tale of education of Kersi, a fourteen year old boy. Nostalgia, which is an essential part of the Parsi consciousness, pervades the narrative.” (Somalatha, 1995: 117) The story is more direct in its treatment of the attempt to come to terms with mortality and physical decline, although the retrospective element – the events are being recalled by the older Kersi, as we learn at the end of the book – add an extra poignancy to the sense of loss. Mistry deftly reconstructs a Sunday in Firozha Baag in bits and pieces. Here, time performs the function of a destroyer. Cricket on Sunday mornings, which was a regular event for the boys in Firozsha Baag, ceases with the passage of time. Thus, Kersi’s nostalgia is the outcome of his painful awareness of the decaying Parsi life. The parents of Kersi represent the typical frustrated community in the Parsis. Disillusioned with India like most westernized Parsis, his father opts for a luxurious life abroad, “And one day, you must go, too, to America. No future here” (136).

The protagonist in this story, Kersi, often pulls out the grey hairs from his father’s head, so that the latter could cling a little longer to the illusion of youth. Kersi’s grandmother like most Parsis was firmly convinced that hair was a thing of evil and could be used for purpose of black-magic. This is the reason why most orthodox Parsis keep their heads covered with a white cloth (in case
of women) and with a cap (in the case of men). So by making the boy pull out his grey hairs. Kersi’s father was in the eyes of his grandmother committing a sin. Kersi’s Mamaiji was not only superstitious about matters concerning hair, but was also a rather devout woman who spun wool for Kusti – a sacred thread worn by Parsi men and women around their waists – and wove them herself. Thus, in this story, Mistry discovers the beauty of life in the ordinariness of the world around him.

“The Paying Guests” depicts the dilemma of the middle class Parsis. His treatment is both original and sympathetic high degree.” (Somalatha, 1995: 118) At one juncture, Boman, the protagonist of this tale cries out:

There are laws to protect the poor … and laws to protect the rich.
But middle class people like us get the bamboo all the way (162).

Boman’s economic anxiety and Khurshedbai’s frustration, born of a discontented dream, symbolizes the typical Parsi life. In this story, Mistry focuses on the evil consequences of communication gap. Boman’s failure is to see his tenant’s suffering from a sympathetic perception. Boman is desperate and knows that the only person who would speak up in court was the Muslim who lived in the next flat. ‘But desperate Boman was. He would not stoop to that; to ask him to testify against a fellow Parsi.’ (168)

There are two interesting things happening in this rejection to approach, one is the fact that the Parsis like the majority minority communities have a ‘closing-of-rank’ approach to their problems. A minority does not tempt attention to one’s self of expose one’s internal weaknesses, to other community. Moreover, there would be the question of the inbuilt distrust that most Parsis still harbour towards Muslims because of the exclusion from Iran of their forefathers by the Muslim Arabs. The other interesting matter related with the Muslim tenant of Firozsha Baag is a more practical one. Baag was a property managed by a Parsi
trust – the trustees are despised often in most of the stories. It is surprising to find a Muslim in such a housing domain. Parsi trust funded housing is available for Parsis only and even those Parsi men who marry non-Parsi women and whose children have been admitted into the Parsi religion find themselves sewed with legal notices to leave their flats in Parsi baags and colonies. Again it indicates the insecurity that community feels because of the outside world (other than Parsi). For them Baag was a source of sense of security, their source of ethnic identity.

“The story *Exercises* opens with Mr and Mrs. Bulsara seeking the support of their family guru, Bhagwan Baba, to convince Jehangir of how unsuitable the girl was for him” (Bharucha, 2003: 100). The Hindu element of a guru (Bhagwan Baba) is introduced in the story – an element which is alien to Zoroastrianism which does not allow mediation between the believer and his/her God. However, some of the leading community’s thinking has leaked into the Parsi world. The story focuses on the parsi community’s dilemma, their anxiety regarding the preservation of their culture. It also witnesses the generational conflicts within the Parsi world.

Jehangir is a shy person whose helplessness is representative of the young in the Parsi community. His sense of unfruitfulness and segregation is suggestive of the generation gap in the Zoroastrian community. In this story, Mistry contrasts the two states – one in which there is motion, activity and life and the other which is characterized by effeteness and iciness which is almost archetypal in Parsis life. Mistry sets part of the story in Hanging Gardens.

“Mistry’s focus here on the near oedipal nature of the mother – son bonding is once again not peculiar to the Parsi community in India, but manifests itself in the mainstream Hindu society, as well as among the Muslims” (Bharucha, 2003: 102). Among the Hindus, the desire for a male child was linked to inheritance laws, wherein only the male heir could inherit his parent’s property.
and to funeral rites which again could only be performed by a son. “The Muslims too have a male-favoring heritage laws. All of these above mentioned reasons do not apply to Parsis and yet they too by virtue of being Indians, also favor their male children.” A blatant example of this male domination is the fact that male Parsis, when they marry non-Parsi women, can have their children admitted into the Zoroastrian religion and they can claim all the benefits and privileges of other Parsi Zoroastrians – except rights of residence in a Parsi housing estate. However, a similar privilege is denied to Parsi women who marry outside the Parsi community” (Bharucha, 2003: 103).

The Parsis in India or in any part of the world are a tiny ethnic minority community and they have tried hard to preserve their ethnic identity. They have been practicing endogamy to preserve their community which has resulted in a drastic fall in their population. Mistry is aware with this situation and the anxieties felt by his community. He is sensitive that his culture is threatened with a slow, steady destruction. The reasons behind this extinction are their extreme individualism, late marriages, and very often the decision to remain unmarried, highly emphasize on purity of their community, low birth rate, high death rate, high rate of divorce and increasing incidences of Alzheimer, osteoporosis and mental illness. If the same rate of birth and death continues, in near future death rate will surpass the birth rate. A. K. Singh (1997) in “Community in the Parsi Novels in English” writes:

Rohinton Mistry has demonstrated immense ability in responding to the existing threats to the Parsi family and community… He narrates his community through the different narratives of his characters… So their stories naturally tend to be the stories of their community. By centralizing their community in their narratives they centralize and preserve and protect themselves, and thus, use it as a psychological crutch. (67)
Conclusion

Rohinton Mistry’s *Tales from Firozsha Baag* is a well-structured imaginative story collection which focuses on the realm of dramatizing this Parsi worldview. The trouble of these tales is to dramatize the conflict and adaptability of the Parsi community to the rapid changing milieu in India and abroad. In any case, the Parsis are immigrants, be it in India, Canada or Britain, their alienation is relative however fruitful. But one thing is certain whether it is the East / West, they have maintained their identity, culture, values and traditions. Thus, in Mistry’s work Zoroastrian world-view eventually acts as a propelling force and provides an excellent medium for adaptability.