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A Stereoscopic Vision: *Tales from Firozsha Baag*

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'What does it mean to be an Indian ' outside India? How can culture be preserved without becoming ossified? ..... IJ7rat are the consequences, both spiritual and practical, of refusing to make consequences to western ideas and practices? What are the consequences of embracing those ideas and practices and turning away from ones that came here with us? (Rushdie 17-18)

These are some questions which are encountered by the Indian Diaspora, who suffer from a sense of triple displacement-they lose their native place, they enter into an alien language and they find themselves among people whose culture and social codes are different and sometimes offensive to their own. And this is what makes the diasporas such pathetic figures, because roots, language and social norms have been three major components which define a human being. The expatriates, denied all three, are obliged to find new ways of describing themselves and new ways of being human. Their spatial and temporal distance from their homelands prods them to undertake a literary journey back home. They a literary work about one's native county by journeys into the past as they want to reconcile themselves to both past and present. They feel it is their "present that is foreign, the past is home, albeit as lost home in a lost city in the mists of lost time". The historical situation of these writersinvolves complex relations with the political and cultural histories of the nations they have left behind and the construction of new identities in the nations to which they have migrated. This voyage into the past is a strategy employed by the diasporic to reconstruct and define their ethical identity and sense ofselffor survival in a world that is alien and often hostile. Particularly in this age of wandering, when 'traditional cultures are being drawn more and more into conflict and confrontation, it is the immigrant uriter who is best equipped,
by the kind of "double vision" attributed to Gibreel Farishta and Saladin Chamcha in The *Satanic Verses* (Cook 23), to come up with the corresponding new literary forms ... patching together a narrative out of the shards of memory.

As a Parsi and then as an immigrant in Canada, Rohinton Mistry sees himself as a symbol of double displacement and this sense of displacement is a recurrent theme in his literary works. His historical situation involves construction of new identity in the nation to which he was migrated and a complex relationship with the political and cultural history of the nation, he has left behind. In his writings he often tries to revision the history of his homeland. In an interview, when asked why India persistently occurs in his works, he says, "It's very naive to assume that you go to a new country and you start a new life and its new chapter—it's not. Canada is the middle of the book. At some point you have to "ite the beginning" (Mistry 3). And the beginning for Mistry has been India .

The present chapter deals with the writer's diasporic consciousness and sense of displacement and multiculturalism the stories from *Tales from Firozsha Baag*. These stories most resonantly evoke the issue of identity, ranging from a relatively reconciled sense of self belonging to two or more geographical areas, to intensely conflicting, often shattering feelings of unbelonging and alienation. In these stories Mistry articulates the ambivalent space between the old culture of India and the new Canada. Caught between the two, his characters and narrator, sometimes in spite of themselves, are engaged in defining their own hybridity.

"Lend Me Your Light" focuses on the problems encountered by the Indian Diaspora and sense of displacement by contrasting the lives of the two friends-Jamshed, who possesses very high ambitions, dreams ofa bright future and material success, abhors India and decides to migrate to America and Percy, who willingly stays in India to help the down-trodden and underprivileged rural folks. Percy's brother, Kersi, the narrator and protagonist of the story, who migrates to Canada, seems to bind the two extreme positions. 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 looks down upon lndians and perpetuates their inferiority when he visits Bombay by insinuating that Indians should do what they can to become more like Americans, they are too subservient and meek, they should stand up for their rights the way people do in the States. He seems 'to have forgotten his ethnic past and indigenous culture and is an example of total assimilation in the West. His letter from America to Kersi, who lives in Canada, mentions India as a gloomy and dismal place with no prospects of success, "Nothing ever improves, just too much of corruption", which is all part of the ghati mentality. Even as a school boy, he thought himself to be superior and had a strange contempt for his class-mates. He never mixed with them and instead of having lunch with them in the school 's drill hall-cum-lunch room, he ate in the family car. His food arrived at a fixed time in the chauffeur-driven, airconditioned, leather-upholstered, family car. This attitude of hating the Indians persists and when he finally migrates to America, he does not even attempt to go back to his roots.

Kersi is also displaced from his homeland, but he wonders why Jamshed's heart is full of disdain and discontentment even when he was no longer living in those conditions. He does not approve of Jamshed's condemnation of India and tries to retain his ethnic identity. He says, "I became a member of Zoroastrian Society of Ontario. Hoping to meet people from Bombay, I also went to the Parsi New Year celebrations and dinner" (Mistry *Firozsha* 182). His letter to Jamshed does not possess Jamshed's contempt for Canada, but he realizes that he is not able to assimilate in Canada. He says, "I am guilty of the sin of hubris for seeking emigration out of the land of my birth, and paying the price in burnt-out eyes : I, Tiresias, blind and throbbing between two lives, the one in Bombay and the other in Toronto" (180). What is more important in this story is the feeling of guilt connected with this voluntary migration. He seems to be, "a cultural hybrid, a man living and sharing intimately in the cultural life and traditions of two distinct peoples; never quite willing to break ...with the past and his traditions, and not quite accepted, because of racial prejudice in the society in which he tries to find a place" (Park 892).

When Kersi visits India, his reaction is the same as Jamshed's. He says, "Bombay seems 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). However, Percy does not make the hostile living conditions, an excuse for leaving India, rather he works with a group of philanthropists who arrange interest free loans and seeds at a lower price for the peasants. He is at absolute peace with himself. Like Boris Pasternak, he, too, thinks that "A departure beyond the borders of my country is for me equivalent to death" (Pasternak 7), as the underprivileged villagers in India are waiting for him, for their dark homes to be lit.

By employing the strategy of contrast, Mistry seems to suggest that Jamshed and Kersi are self-centred, lack a feeling of Nationalism, integrity and authenticity, i.e. why they find the same Indian ambience intolerable in which Percy has decided to live forever. The desire to be located within an indigenous culture and work there and the gravitational pull towards the Western metropolis
and get assimilated in that culture provides a major creative tension in this story,

The story "Swimming Lessons" also deals with personal identity, recollections of his homeland and his adjustments in a new ambience. He tries to balance the often irreconcilable threads of self-definition which

radiate outwards from his birthplace to places of residence and work, family and community. He explores the problematic of dual identity that must necessarily shift its precincts. In this story his focus is both on his created home and community in Canada and on the home he has left behind in India. He employs a variety of tones and attitudes—nostalgic, ironic and humorous--in meeting the challenges by being an expatriate. Like Kersi in "Lend Me Your Light", the protagonist of this story, too, perceives life in dual perspective, what Rushdie has called "stereoscopic vision" and there+ exists a double identity, culture, loyalty and even language. He feels that he is both an insider and outsider in this land, is both native and foreign and occupies the between-world position. The narrative weaves around his acceptance of the identity which is "at once plural and partial" and his straddling between two cultures. He knows that he can never be completely mainstreamed into this new world and can never melt into the oblivion of the Canadian world because of the remnants of India that he carries with him.

The story is set in Canada and is complexly structured to accommodate the narrative shifts between the Indian past and Canadian present and dramatizes the clash between Oriental and Western culture. His life in Canada is juxtaposed with Indian past through the process of memory. Everything in Canada transfers his mind to India and he becomes nostalgic. His apartment in Canada reminds him of his home in Firozsha Baag and the swimming pool draws a portrait of Chowpatty Beach in his mind. The old man reminds him of Grandpa who, when unable to read to Bombay Samachar, used to sit on the veranda and stared at the traffic outside Firozsha Baag or waved to anyone who passed by in the compound : Rustomji, Nariman Hansotia in his 1932 Mercedez-Benz, the fat ayah Jaakaylee with her shopping bag, the kuchrawalli with her basket and long bamboo broom. The Portuguese woman, who gathers and disseminates information, is the communicator for the apartment building. She seems so life-like and is like a woman in any Indian neighbourhood who takes liberty of unabashedly throwing open her door when newsworthy events transpire. The entire story oscillates between personal constructs of home and away. It seems that the protagonist is sceptical of the Western culture which he has joined. His use of oppositions and contrasts and parallels between cultures, forms and geographical locales and at the same time his endeavour to construct an identity, focuses on the ambivalent position of the diaspora.

The writer draws a parallel between the Indian and Canadian culture where old people are venerated and cared for. The old man's daughter does not talk to anyone in the building but takes good care of her father and the narrator's mother used to take good care of Grandpa and said that the blessings of an old person were the most valuable and potent of all.

The parents feel that the son (the narrator of the story) feels alienated and estranged from them and hence does not write anything about his personal life. They wonder why "everything about his life is locked in silence and secrecy" (Mistry 232) and why he bothered to visit them last year if he had nothing to say and in every letter of his he mentions just the Canadian weather and that they should not worry. They think that may be is not every happy and does not want to communicate this to his parents.

The son, like Mistry, is another diasporic writer. He becomes nostalgic and returns through his writings to Bombay, where he spent his childhood. He, too, tries to create stories about his homeland on the basis of memory. Maybe, he wants to preserve his memories, preserve it in the form of stories before they fade away altogether. The question of identity, both metaphoric and literal, depicted through literary and artistic tools often used as strategies for survival in a world that is alien and often hostile is explored in his stories. "Swimming Lessons" oscillates between personal constructs of home and away. It seems that the protagonist is sceptical of the Western culture which he has joined. Mistry's use of oppositions and contrasts and parallels between cultures, forms and geographical locales and at the same time his endeavour to construct an identity focuses on the ambivalent position of the diaspora.

All his initial stories are about Bombay, he remembers every little thing about his childhood, he is thinking about it all the time even though he is miles away. He misses his home, his parents and everything he left behind. The parents wonder that there must be so many new ideas that his new life could give him but he does not write any stories about Canada, maybe because he has not been able to assimilate in the new atmosphere.

In the stories about Parsis, all the Parsi families were poor or middle class and the seeds for the stories were picked from the sufferings of their own lives. His description of Parsis is totally authentic. Ironically, he is able to achieve this authenticity as he has distanced himself by emigrating to Canada and produces the effect of an insider/outsider to every detail that is engraved in his memory. His father wonders why the son has forgotten the Parsis who have contributed greatly to the society and whom they are proud of: the great Tatas and their contribution to the steel industry or Dishaw Petit in the textile industry who made Bombay the Manchester of the East or Dadabhai Naoroji in the freedom movement, where he was the first to use the world Swaraj. Mistry makes certain generalizations and asserts that the Parsi community was 'the richest, most advanced and philanthropic community in Indian and had a reputation of being generous and family-oriented. On the other hand, he says, "We are the chosen people where osteoporosis is concerned. And divorce. The Parsi community has the highest divorce rate in India. It also claims to be the most westernized community in India, which is the result of the other? Confusion again of cause and effect" (230).

The story gives an insight into Parsi culture, their religious ceremonies and their belief in Avan Yazad as the guardian of the sea. Although, the son lives in Canada, his parents do not want him to forget Parsi values and culture. The father tells his wife to write to their son : "remind him he is a Zoroastrian: manashni, gavashni, kunshani, 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". The mother wonders whether he still wears his Sudra and Kusti.

The last story written by the son like the last story "Swimming Lessons" is mostly about Canada, his day-to-day life there, his feelings and emotions and experiences in Canada. It seems that now he is able to adjust in the Canadian society. this is made evident by Mistry as he employs the water imagery. The initial inability of the son to swim smoothly in the waters of Chaupatty beach in Bombay and also in the swimming pool in Canada portrays his inability to assimilate in either society. However, by the end of the story, water, the amniotic fluid, is the medium through which he is reborn. As he reopens his eyes he perceives life in dual perspective or the "stereoscopic vision" of life.

The protagonist in Canada misses the rich cultural and religious life of
India. He thinks of the rituals and ceremonies accompanying a religious festival, Ganesh Chaturthi—clay idols of Lord Ganesha adorned with garlands and all the manner of finery which were carried in processions to the accompaniment of drums and a variety of wind instruments. The music, which got more frenzied the closer the procession got to Chaupatty and to the moment immersion, reverberates in his ears and he relives those moments.

Mistry gives us a glimpse of Canadian weather, too, and points out that the expatriates are quite sensitive to it. The narrator notices the extreme cold winter, the low temperatures all through February and March, the nice warm summer and 'the familiar maple leaves. He is aware of the fact that immigrants from hot countries always enjoy the snow the first year, maybe for a couple of years more, then inevitably the dread sets in and the approach of winter gets them fretting and moping.

Besides giving a vivid description of Parsi culture, Mistry in this story covertly hints at the discrimination which Indians have to face in the West. They are denied certain prerogatives which the Whites enjoy. He

says that the instructor does not value the lives of non-white immigrants "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). These lines are highly symbolic.

The writer also compares and contrasts the socio-economic conditions of the two countries. He hints at the prosperity of Canada where "everyone eats well whether they work or not" (232) and comments on the poverty and corruption in India, the black market, and wait at the ration shops. The story, like his novel *A Fine Balance*, explores a face of India, more specifically Bombay, the Shiv Sena agitation, menacing strikes and Bombay Bundhs with no respect for the public, but drivers and conductors behaving as if they owned the buses and were doing favours to commuters. Ironically, he is able to achieve this authenticity as he has distanced himself by migrating to Canada and produces the effect of insider/outsider to every detail that is engraved in his memory.

In the story "Squatter", the central character, Sarosh, an Indian from Parsi community living in Firozsha Baag, decides to migrate to Canada. His friends and relatives discuss the pros and cons of his decision. Some of them think that he has taken a correct decision and his whole life will transform for the better. Others feel that by emigrating he is committing a great folly and this will make him very unhappy. However, Sarosh tries to balance the two opposing views and says, "if I do not become completely Canadian in exactly ten years from the time I land there, then I will come back" (154-155). His mother counsels him, "It is better to live in want among your family and friends, who love you and care for you, than to be unhappy surrounded by vacuum cleaners and dish washers and big shiny motor cars" (155). Ten years later, Sarosh calls himself 'Sid' and is totally Westernized in all ways except one i.e. he is unable to use Western toilets. Throughout the story, Mistry discusses this experience of Sarosh in a light-hearted manner. Sarosh's inability to use Western toilets symbolized his cultural dislocation and its social and psychological dangers. In fact, it is not merely the Western toilet but the xenophobia that makes his adjustment even more difficult in a foreign country. Xenophobia is confronted with the basic indigenous native culture of one's country resulting in alienation and loneliness.

Sarosh represents those Indian immigrants, who desire to become completely Canadian, seem quite willing to forget their ethnic past, to efface
their native roots and immerse themselves totally in the Western culture. Sarosh's aim is assimilation and his inability to achieve this is seen as a sign of failure, "If he could not be Westernized in all respects, he was nothing but a failure in this land—a failure not just in the washrooms of the nation but everywhere" (162). He seems to be passing through a transitional phase of adjustment, which is a period of inner conflict and turmoil and through which every diaspora passes.

In a story a group of neighbourhood boys in Bombay clusters around Nariman, the local storyteller, to listen to his latest tale. Jehangu, the would-be intellectual ofthe group, declares that “unpredictability was the brush" Nariman used to paint his stories with, "and ambiguity the palette he mixed his colours
Jehangu said that Nariman sometimes told a funny incident in a very serious way, or expressed a significant matter in a light and playful manner. And these were only two rough divisions, in between were lots of subtle gradations of tone and texture. Which then, was the funny story and which the serious ? Their opinions were divided, but ultimately, said Jehangu, "it was up to the listener to decide".

The same description might well be applied to these tales by Rohinton Misty, a young writer who has already won considerable acclaim abroad. Having left India in 1975 to live in Canada, Misty has created in this volume, a world and a time-presumably, as one highly autobiographical story implies, the lost world of his own childhood in Bombay. As in R.K. Narayan's Malgudi books, the volume is informed by a tone ofgentle

compassion for seemingly insignificant lives, and as in K. Narayan's work, the stories interconnect to give us a portrait of a minutely detailed fictional place—in this case, the apartment complex of Firozsha Baag.

In other respects, “Swimming Lessons” has more in common with Joyce's Dubliners : not only do the stories all deal with a fading middle class—both its suffocating atmosphere of pettiness and its shabby decencies are chronicled by Mistry who has already left it behind—but they also tend to pivot around incidents that reveal to the characters some unforeseen truth about their lives.

In "One Sunday", a young cricket player named Kersi, who has become pals with the local handyman, is called upon to catch a thief who has stolen money from a neighbour—a thief who turns out to be his old friend. In "Auspicious Occasion", an aging sourpuss named Rustomji finds that an accident on the way to the local temple (a man spits on him from a bus) has focused all his anxieties and abruptly shattered his life's self-satisfied facade. And in "The Collectors", a doctor, disappointed by his own progeny's boorish behaviour, takes on a neighbour’s child as his surrogate son—only to suffer feelings of betrayal and disappointment after a prized stamp from his collection mysteriously disappears and the boy fails to clear his name.

As we are initiated into the day-to-day rhythms of this ingrown Parsi community (the weekly religious rituals performed by the devout, as well as the daily squabbles and exchanges that take place between neighbours), we slowly get to know all the building's residents : the local curmudgeon, who secretly covets his wife's cleaning woman, the fat Najamaj, who ingratiates herself with others by giving them access to her precious refrigerator, Jacqueline, a superstitious maid, whose sexual fantasies produce a real-life ghost, and a couple who sublet a room in an apartment and soon succeed in making life miserable for everyone in Firozsha Baag. As the stories span a decade or so, we see the older residents deal with death and illness, the younger ones grow up and move away.
Caught on the margins of a changing culture that embraces everything from arranged marriages to Mercedes-Benzes, many of the characters in “Swimming Lessons” feel torn between tradition and modernity, the old rituals of piety and self-abnegation, and the new imperatives of ambition and self fulfillment. A woman named Daulat, whose husband has just died, frets over a busybody neighbour's insistence that she follow every last religious ritual to the letter, and she surreptitiously proceeds with her own agenda, confident that her husband's soul will nonetheless be saved. A teen-ager similarly chafes under his parents' insistence that he consult a holy man about his new-found romance. But while he worries that such a consultation will cause his girlfriend to dismiss him as a shallow fool, he ends up succumbing to his parents' wishes—with predictably unhappy results.

In the case of another young man-the cricket player Kersi, whom we met in an earlier story—the conflicts between the old and the new open out into a larger question of cultural loyalties. Having left his family and friends to live in Toronto, he finds himself torn between a nostalgic loyalty for India and an eagerness to escape its suffocating poverty, its backwardness and provincialism. A trip home to visit his family, however, does not clarify matters, as Kersi hopes; he returns to Canada, as confused as before.

It is in "Swimming Lessons" that Kersi is revealed as a kind of fictional surrogate for the author, and we are made to understand the evolution of the book we hold in our hands. As Kersi's parents read his collection, his mother says "he must be so unhappy" there in Canada, "all his stories are about Bombay, he remembers every little thing about his childhood, he is thinking about it all the time even though he is ten thousand miles away". His father disagrees. "He said it did not mean that he was unhappy, all writers worked in the same way, they used their memories and experiences and made stories out of them, changing some things, adding some, imagining some; all writers were very good at remembering details of their lives".

In writing a series of interlinked tales, which have a cumulative a reverberative effect, Mistry is "following a pattern received from both his Indian and Canadian literary milieus. R.K. Narayan wrote tales that intermesh and map out life in the South Indian village of Malgudi, and Alice Munro continues to embroider the rich tapestry of a small Ontario town" (Turner 2). One is frequently reminded of both authors in reading Swimming Lessons as Mistry, with the meticulousness of an archaeologist uncovering a civilization shard by shard, reveals the microcosm of Firozsha Baag, an apartment complex in Bombay.

Firozsha Baag's residents, mostly Parsi, but also Hindu and Muslim, represent middle-class Bombay, or rather the professional middle class (accountants, lawyers, doctors) who live in more or less genteel poverty. By the final story, we know Firozsha Baag. We know its leaking plumbing and peeling paint, its aged cars, the apartment that has the refrigerator (shared by many) and the one with the telephone (shared by all). We know marital secrets, family triumphs, generational conflicts. We know the families and their servants and their relatives, including the sons and daughters who've emigrated to New York or Toronto, and who remain no less tied to Firozsha Baag for that. In fact, as one deliciously stirical story makes clear, neither distance nor time nor even a legal chance of passport can free the roving sons and daughters of Firozsha Baag from their past. As a Toronto counsellor for Immigration Problems comments about certain symptoms of culture shock : "Some of us thought these problems were linked to retention of original citizenship. But this was a false lead".

The liveliest stories are the early ones, when the children who will later emigrate are still playing cricket in the compound, and teasing the old ayah who sees ghosts, and hiding under the slatted steps with voyeuristic intentions when the teen-age girls go upstairs. The tiny details that make up life in Bombay are exquisitely evoked : the constant chewing and spitting of betel juice that covers the ground (and in one story, a freshly laundered white lungi) with what appear to be splats of blood; the way the city water supply is turned off at 6 a.m. during the hot, dry season, so that a household has to be up at 5 a.m. to fill all available vessels with water; the way people are far more intimately connected with the processes of aging and bodily frailty and dying than is the case any more in North America.

Mistry is reminiscent of Indian novelist Anita Desai in his depiction of sudden and grotesque incursions of violence into the community, but he has a habit of predictably and rather portentously foreshadowing these events (a splat of betel juice on white cloth prefigures a murder; a rat bludgeoned with a cricket bat precedes the bludgeoning of a starving servant) and in general there is a tendency toward heavy-handed symbolism.

On the other hand, there are cultural nuances in Bombay that Mistry conveys with the · skill of a master. He evokes, with sharp eye and gentle wit, the secret eroticism of a puritan culture : the innocent voyeurism of married men and the fantasies of widowed women. He conveys sparsely and powerfully the tug of war between compassion and the survival instinct : "Rustomji too would have liked to feel sorrow and compassion. But he was afraid. He had decided long ago that this was no country for sorrow or compassion or pity—these were worthless and, at best, inappropriate".

Mistry often disrupts his narrative to include words and expressions from his native language which is typical of an expatriate writer. Straddling multiple cultures, texts and languages, his stories advocate an embrace of plurality and celebrate hybridity, intermingling, the transformation that comes of new and unexpected combinations of human beings, cultures and ideas and reveal his diasporic consciousness.

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