



Emergence of Materialism in Rohinton Mistry's Short Story *Ghost of Firozsha Baag*

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Abstract

*Rohinton Mistry is a Parsi, diaspora writer who depicts the complexities of colonialism in India. Mistry incorporates elements of mysticism and surrealism in his stories. He highlights the psychological issues of his characters through their experiences in life. His works show declining moral and ethical values, traditions of Zoroastrianism and emphasize their predilection towards emergent materialism. Parsi people concern their identity and ethnicity in multicultural India. Mistry presents the practical social life in his stories and has a special regard for Parsi culture and tradition. The aim of this paper is to analyse the emergence of materialism in Mistry's short story *Ghost of Firozsha Baag*.*

Keywords: Psychological, Zoroastrianism, Predilection, Materialism, Multicultural, Diaspora

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Ghost of Firozsha Baag is a commentary on Parsi culture and social traditions made by a non-Parsi narrator Jacqueline. She works as a servant for a professional Parsi couple who live upstairs in B block. Jacqueline's name is mispronounced as Jaakaylee by her bosses. Mistry has observed how ayahs live close to the floor, grinding masala and chopping vegetables. Jaakaylee sleeps outside the flat, by the stairs, so as not to disturb her employees after attending midnight mass. Jaakalee cooks curries and the spices ground for them are the leitmotif that runs through this story. Jacqueline is a catholic Christian and makes observations about Parsi Zoroastrianism with objectivity and psychological detachment.

Michael Ignatieff in his work *The Need of Strangers* (1984) writes, The language of human beings is a basic way of speaking about this idea of a natural human identity ... A society in which strangers would feel common

belonging and mutual responsibility to each other depends on trust, and trust reposes in turn on the idea that beneath differences there is identity. (27)

Mistry deals with the theme of displacement and exile within the country for people in search of employment. According to Rushdie, living in exile is believed to be a great loss; "exiles or emigrants or expatriates are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim to look back even at the risk of being mutated into pillars of salt" (78). An individual person's native can be identified by the frequent use of words. Language is considered to be the identity of a person. Jaakaylee is an illiterate ayah even then she feels the pangs of displacement from Goa to Bombay. But she reconciles all this with finding a job in Bombay.

Mistry highlights the speaking style of the half educated aging Goan servant Jaakaylee's idiosyncratic English "Now a days



my weight is much more than it is used to be, and is getting very difficult for me to get up from floor but I am managing” (TFB 45). Jaakaylee recalls the process by which it was renamed, “All the fault is of old has who died ten years ago... old bai took English words and made them Parsi words” (TFB 44). The narrator uses Hindi, Parsi and Konkani words in this story which give a realistic touch to it. Parsis mispronounces, Easy chair was igeechur, French beans was ferach beech, and Jacqueline became Jaakaylee. Later I found out that all old Parsis did this, it was like they made their own private language. So then new bai called me Jaakaylee also, and children do the same. 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 (TFB 45).

The treatment of Supernatural elements and superstitions among the Parsis are the major content of the story. Jaakaylee states the ghosts are gone away by the Baag residents as the ramblings of an old woman from a backward part of the country. But her owner, Bai and Seth react with scepticism when awakened by their unnerved ayah. The children of FirozshaBaag make fun of her by saying, “SEE TODAY at APSARA CINEMA, R.K. ANAND's NEN Filling Booot Bungla starring JAAKAYLEE of Block B” (TFB 47). Dr. Mody's notorious son Pesi wearing a white bed sheet plays the role of a ghost successfully to tease two modern girls of Firozsha Baag, Vera and Dolly, daughters of Najamai.

The story creates fun, fear and supernatural elements and also foregrounds that Parsis Zoroastrianism firmly believes in secularism. The narrator appreciates Parsi's charity, secularism and non-conservation, Jaakaylee says, “I was saying it was very lucky for me to become ayah in a Parsi house and never will I forget that ” (TFB 46). She reveals the superiority complex prevalent among Parsis but is not a blind supporter of the Parsi

community. When a Parsi baby is born, “If it is fair they say, o how nice light skin just like parents. But if it is dark skin they say, arre what is this ayah no chhokro, ayah's child” (TFB 46). Being a Catholic Christian Jaakaylee pictures the Parsi culture and traditions with an artistic detachment and objectivity. She comments upon various opinions and issues of Parsis. Their sense of superiority complex is shown when Parsi priests claim “Parsi priest has the most powerful prayers of all” (TFB 54) in comparison to Hindu priests. Jaakaylee narrates the series of incidents how her Bai begins to believe in ghosts and organises a ritual called “Jashan” (TFB 60) performed with great devotion and piousness to tackle ghosts.

The narrator observes that the Parsi family is fond of Goan curry. Parsis give preference to hand-made masala in curry for its original taste. The narrator tells the recipe of making Goan curry and basmati rice. Her way of describing recipes creates sensuousness. The changing dressing sense among Parsis is described in this story. The conventional Parsi ladies wear sarees but it has been replaced for ultra-modern girls of Firozsha Baag who have started wearing high heels shoes and mini skirt, the narrator makes a comment, “very esskey – messkey, so short I don't know how their mai- baap allowed it” (TFB 47). Parsis celebrate New Year's Eve and they go to the cinema. The modern girls Dolly and Vera do not hesitate to see the night show. Jaakaylee makes an observation about human behaviour and she says, “very rich people, my baiseth. He is a chartered accountant. He has a nice motor car, just like A- Block priest, and like the Dr.Mody used to drive. Bai says they should buy it from Mrs. Mody, she wants it to go shopping” (TFB 47). This shows the economic condition of her employer but she further comments, “but a masala machine they will not buy” (TFB 47).

The story reflects the special features of not only Parsi Zoroastrianism but imparts information about catholic Christians also.



When Dustoorji performs “jashan” (TFB 60) in the house of a chartered accountant, he tells Jaaykalee to go inside because he thinks that Parsi prayers are so powerful that only a Parsi can listen to the prayers. But when Bai the employer of Jaakaylee is haunted by “bhoot” (ghost) and she starts to think that prayers did not work effectively and exposes the only hollowness of such claims as made by the priest. So, he decides to involve a non-Parsi woman Jaakaylee in “a little magic with soopra and scissors” (TFB 63). She covers her hand with a white “mathoobanoo” (TFB 63) as the little magic requires two Parsis. It shows that the fear of bhoot (ghost) shatters the difference of Parsi and non-parsi in them and melts the borders of religion, race and class.

Mistry reveals the life of Parsis, their culture and traditions, rituals, food habits, celebrations along with their fear and mysticism. He presents human behaviour in all religions and faith has some common features. Memory is a powerful element in the works of Mistry to reveal reminiscences of his narrator Jaakaylee. It is an act of dispersal, a scattering, a flight and has to take root elsewhere and finally succeed to present a composite culture. All representations and reproductions of the homeland cannot be

considered equally valid or invalid. Ethically, morally and literally evaluations should be different and emancipated from global cultural politics.

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