



ISSN 2455-7544
www.daathvoyagejournal.com

Daath Voyage : An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in English

A UGC Refereed Open Access Journal
Vol.4 No.2, June, 2019

Editor: Saikat Banerjee

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Daath Voyage

: An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in English
A UGC Refereed e- Journal no 45349

ISSN 2455-7544
Vol.4, No.2, June, 2019

www.daathvoyagejournal.com

Human Intricacies in Select Short Stories of Rohinton Mistry

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Abstract: Short story is an important genre of literature in English language. Every culture exhibits some short stories whether these are in the form of folklore or written tale. In Indian literary system, short stories are now an emerging genre that portrays the essence of Indian culture and perspectives. Writers such as Rabindranath Tagore, R.K. Narayana, Raja Rao and Mulk Raj Anand have started the legacy of short story writing. It is now carried forward by contemporary writers such as Ruskin Bond, Rohinton Mistry, Jhumpa Lahiri etc.

The paper aims to analyse two short stories of Indian diaspora writer Rohinton Mistry. The short stories are “Auspicious Occasion” and “One Sunday” from the short story collection *Tales from Firozsha Baag*. These short stories present the sheer human nature and behaviour of people in day to day environment. The complexities of life entangle human being to behave in a certain manner.

Keywords: Short story, Parsi, human beings, detail.

Short stories have always played an eminent part in the development of every civilization. These are small pieces of text that provides a story in a small narrative. Fables and oral tales are retold with new variations and are passed on from generation to generation. These used to work as a source of entertainment as well as instruction. In the ancient times, short stories served as a way of enlightening the masses. The allegorical tales and beast fables used to fascinate people and also provided a strong moral message.

In the contemporary scenario, short story is developed into an important literary genre. It developed from ancient epics such as *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*, *Iliad*, Arabian tales etc. Episodes from such epics were created as short stories and used to be narrated. Gradually, with development of the lengthy novels, the demand for short stories also increased as people were interested to read shorter narratives that require less time. According to *Encyclopaedia Britannica*:



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The short story is usually concerned with a single effect conveyed in only one or a few significant episodes or scenes. The form encourages economy of setting, concise narrative, and the omission of a complex plot; character is disclosed in action and dramatic encounter but is seldom fully developed. (Hansen)

One of the important predecessors of short story writing in English is Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* (1388). A work of frame narrative, every character in the work tells a tale while travelling. In 19th century, American writer Washington Irving wrote "Rip Van Winkle" and other short stories that were mysterious in nature. The Brothers Grimm published fairy tales that became worldwide phenomenon. Thomas Hardy also wrote some short stories.

But the short stories developed fully as a genre in around 20th century. It became particularly famous in the United States with writers such as William Faulkner, O. Henry, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Edgar Allen Poe, and Ernest Hemingway. Other great writers include Arthur Conan Doyle, Somerset Maugham, Anton Chekhov, Katherine Mansfield, Guy De Maupassant, Leo Tolstoy, Maxim Gorky etc.

In Indian literary circle, works such as *Kathasarit Sagar*, *Panchatantra*, *Vaital Panchvinshati* and *Jatak Tales* contributed in the development of short stories. In the twentieth century, Rabindranath Tagore published numerous short stories that empowered the Indian short story writing in English. Other writers such as Munshi Premchand and Shivani were prolific writers of Hindi language which were translated in English language. The genre slowly developed in India and writers such as R.K. Narayana, Raja Rao and Mulk Raj Anand also started writing short stories. The short stories of all such writers were reflecting the Indian culture, social structure and the myths and legends associated to it. More importantly, the writings focus on Indian people and their problems. The social issues of untouchability, race, caste, poverty, hunger are discussed in details in such works.

After independence, more writers started emerging such as K.Abbas, who highlighted the problems of poverty, hunger, unemployment in his short stories. Khushwant Singh, Bhabani Bhattacharya, Anita Desai, Manohar Malgaonkar, Arun Joshi, R.P. Jhabvala and Jayant Mahapatra are some of the key writers in the field of short stories. Other writers such as Rohinton Mistry,



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Ruskin Bond, Jhumpa Lahiri and Shobha De have also shown the complexities of modern day world in their short stories.

Rohinton Mistry is an Indian writer in English who lives in Canada. Born in 1952 and brought up in Bombay in a Parsi community, Mistry migrated to Toronto for studies. He later settled in Toronto and began his writing career. In 1987, he published his first work entitled *Tales from Firozsha Baag* which was a collection of eleven short stories. In 1991, he published his first novel *Such a Long Journey* that received much critical acclaim. His other novels include *A Fine Balance* (1995) and *Family Matters* (2002).

His short story collection *Tales from Firozsha Baag* consists of eleven stories all concerned with people living in a Parsi society called Firozsha Baag. The stories revolve around people residing in the colony of Firozsha Baag, dealing with their ordinary life that encompasses the human emotions of melancholy, hope, rejoice, anger, happiness, frustration and resignation. "Mistry's critical perceptions are always woven skilfully into the texture of each narrative" comments Nissim Ezekiel. Further the stories and:

The characters represent Parsis at odds with their religious beliefs and the larger community, and also conveys the common human issues of spiritual questions, alienation, fear of death, family problems, and economic hardships. (Ezekiel)

The stories offer great insight into human life that gives minute details of human existence. Stories such as "Auspicious Occasion", "the Ghost of Firozsha Baag", "Condolence Visit", "Lend me Your Light", "Swimming Lessons", and "One Sunday" provide with a vivid canvas of human beings. "Auspicious Occasion" and "One Sunday" are two such stories that reflect the human intricacies as seen in life.

"Auspicious Occasion" written by Rohinton Mistry is the first story in the collection *Tales from Firozsha Baag*. It narrates the story of a Parsi couple Rustomji and Mehroo who live in the Firozsha Baag Apartment Complex. The title of the story refers to the auspicious occasion of Behram Roje which is the twentieth day of the month in the holy Parsi calendar and is celebrated by them. The story begins with Mehroo, the young wife of Rustomji, who's preparing to go to the fire



temple to celebrate the sacred day. On the other hand, Rustomji is muttering and filled with rage on little things such as the lavatory is leaking and that he's constipated. He is only complaining about the problems in the system and making every little thing a matter of his ego. Mehroo is still cheerful and does not pay much heed to it as she does not want to spoil the day.

The opening scene draws a very typical human picture where two opposite temperaments are presented with Rustomji and Mehroo. Rustomji is blowing everything out of proportion while Mehroo tries to keep things in balance and takes care of the leaking lavatory. These characters exhibit the duality in nature and the concept of yin and yang, where an equal and opposite will be there to support it.

The story moves forward with Mehroo leaving her house to go to the fire temple. She then takes a bus, all excited to pray at the temple. She thinks and imagines the peace she'll get while at the temple. The pondering of thoughts is a relatable human activity that people take up unknowingly. Human beings tend to get lost in thoughts amidst their excitement and so does Mehroo. In other words people daydream which Mehroo is doing where she's dreaming about possibilities that could occur. According to Marilyn Price-Mitchell:

According to a study by Harvard psychologists Daniel Gilbert and Matthew A. Killingsworth, we daydream forty-seven percent of our waking hours. That's right. Forty-seven percent! Whenever we are the least bit bored, our minds naturally wander. What happens in those hours of daydreaming? We explore associations. We make connections. We search for possibilities. (Mitchell)

Rustomji on the other hand, still paints a humorous picture of him trying to release his bowels. His frustration reflects amusing tone but later takes the shade of angst and trauma. He goes to the bus stop in his agitated mood only to encounter fight with the "ghatis" slang used for people from Western Ghats. In addition to that, more miseries befell upon him when his white clothes get stained by tobacco spit by a bus driver. Irritated he starts cursing everyone that result in him getting beaten up and running for his life. The character of Rustomji represents all the living people who remain sour most of the time but they ultimately surrender to the travesties of life.



His anger and frustration on little aspects demonstrate his cramped attitude towards life. His irritability on minor things such as leaking pipes shows his regressive perspective where he ignores man beautiful features of life. He is representative of many such personas who undergo the same feeling and agitation. *New York Times* mentions about Rustomji in the following lines:

The stories all turn on excruciating situations made vivid by Mr. Mistry's use of locking imagery. The characters are throttled by their immediate surroundings and foreclosed futures. Constipation is an almost manic concern. In the opening story, "Auspicious Occasion," the curmudgeonly protagonist can't defecate and is doused by a broken overhead toilet tank. When he tries to reach the Parsi temple through narrow, dangerous streets, he is forced to flee home by a non-Parsi street crowd that threatens him with violence. (Cooke)

Mehroo goes to the temple only to find out that a priest has been murdered and the prayer session has been cancelled. The only day she planned to celebrate turned out to be inauspicious and the title of the story becomes ironic. Filled with grief, she returns home where Rustomji also joins her. She narrates the entire scenario to him, listening to which he's filled with agony and distress. Both are saddened by the events of the city. They somehow feel close to each other while discussing these events. The murder of a man narrows the gaps that were earlier caused because of small rifts and tensions of daily life.

"Auspicious Occasion" presents the minute details of human life. Characters of Rustomji and Mehroo give vivid description of ordinary human lives that encompasses love, hatred anger remorse, sorrow and surrender. The story not only reflects the Parsi consciousness but also people in general. The way Rustomji gets frustrated on seeing the leaking pipe is any individual in a middle class family who is annoyed on seeing it. Mehroo and Rustomji despite of all their differences, the events of the day bring them closer and making them understands each other.

"One Sunday" is the story of inmates living in Firozsha Baag apartments and their ordinary human lives. The main character of the story is Najamai who is a fifty-five years old widow and she lives alone in her flat. Her neighbours are Tehmina and the Boyces, with whom she often leaves her keys. Tehmina and the Boyces both use her refrigerator as Najamai has offered them to do so. But a typical human selfishness lurks in this act as she wants her flat to be safe. She's not interested in



offering them genuine help. The whole act shows the deep human intricacies that are witnessed in day to day lives.

The story also has a Christian character and the only non-Parsi character by the name Francis who does all the works for the people in the apartment in order to live in the areas of apartment complex. The residents of Firozsha Baag would give him leftover food on which he survives. Kersi and Percy, the sons of Mrs Boyce were friendly towards him which Mrs Boyce disliked as he considered him a sort of beggar who's not even a Parsi. This reflects the meanness with which Mrs Boyce lived, another human facet many have towards homeless people. In addition, it also reflects communal conflict as Francis is a Christian. He's looked down upon and treated inhumanly by most of the people of apartment.

One Sunday, Najamai was not in her flat and Tehmina went there to get some ice from her fridge. Not able to open the lock, she abusively calls Francis for help. Francis was hungry and had not eaten anything for the past two days. But Tehmina was only interested in her job done and didn't offer him anything to eat. This portrays another form of self-serving attitude which is an important trait in human beings. Rather than sympathizing with him and giving him food, she was cursing him.

When Najamai returns to her flat in the night, she hears strange voice and thinks that there's a thief. She immediately shouts for help and Mrs Boyce and Kersi were there at her service. The only suspect is considered to be Francis who's an outsider, a homeless and a beggar. Francis and Kersi both start thrashing Francis without even knowing the whole story. More people gather and thrash Francis. He's taken to the apartment complex where all the residents of the complex abuse him, slap him and curse him. He's beaten so hard that he lies still on the ground unable to say much. Francis did steal a small amount of food as he was extremely hungry and had not eaten anything for two days. But nobody cared what he said. Everybody was availing his services but nobody gave him food.

He was so famished that when he saw food he was not able to control himself which is very obvious with an empty stomach. People like Mrs Boyes or Tehmina all gave Francis work to do but did not pay him back with food. These people now accused him of stealing and ungratefulness



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which shows their utter unsympathetic attitude towards Francis. Their apathetic and selfish behaviour depicts the unkind and thoughtless nature.

The stories “Auspicious Occasion” and “One Sunday” illustrate the different shades of human beings. The characters in these stories elucidate the features of human life which everyone experiences such as frustration, anger, unkindness, satisfaction, apathy, rudeness, manipulation etc. According to Dr James Proctor,

Tales from Firozsha Baag (1992), Mistry’s first collection of stories, marked the arrival of a prodigious talent. Published in the US as *Swimming Lessons*, the collection contains eleven interrelated short stories that brings together some of Mistry’s earliest and finest writing. The tales detail the day to day lives of the residents of a decrepit apartment block in Bombay: Firozsha Baag. Mistry’s affectionate, thumbnail sketches bring together the lives of miserly Rustomji, the deranged Jaakaylee and Pesi, who is able to look up girls’ skirts with the aid of his torch. (Proctor)

The emotions and feelings one encounters while travelling in a bus may pass as soon as we reach the destination. But Mistry has lay emphasis on this condition that Mehroo goes through while going to the temple. Her excitement can be compared to that with a child. The disappointment she witnesses on reaching the temple makes one realize that life is not fair all the time. Rustomjii who was filled with anger and agitations is not given any importance when he goes out with his ranting. Contrary to this, he’s shouted upon and beaten up making him run home. Both Mehroo and Rustomji return home sad but evolved. They understand the miseries yet being together makes it bearable for them.

Similarly, in “One Sunday”, the fine details of the human pathos are portrayed. All the characters such as Najamai, Tehmina and Mrs Boyes display a level of selfishness and cleverness that goes beyond the understanding of human emotions. Their meanness is suggestive within themselves where Najamai is giving her flat keys for security purpose and both Tehmina and Mrs Boyes using the refrigerator as a bargain for keeping her flat secure. Moreover, their insensitivity can witnessed when they don’t provide food to hungry Francis.



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Also, people started beating Francis like animals that display mob mentality. It appears monstrous. It reflects a dark side of the human beings that is pitiful. The following passage shed some light about mob mentality:

When people are part of a group, they often experience deindividuation, or a loss of self-awareness. When people deindividuate, they are less likely to follow normal restraints and inhibitions and more likely to lose their sense of individual identity. Groups can generate a sense of emotional excitement, which can lead to the provocation of behaviors that a person would not typically engage in if alone. Think about the last sporting event or concert you attended. It's unlikely that you would have been yelling or singing the way you were if you were the only person doing it! The group seems to make some behaviors acceptable that would not be acceptable otherwise. (Donley)

This lack of warmth and thoughtfulness denotes pain and affliction for the human civilization because there will be many like Francis who are bearing this burden of insult and torture in the country. These stories, thus, describe the human conditions which can be apathetic, meagre, self-awakening and evolving amidst which people are living and Rohinton Mistry had intended to bring our attention towards the little human details of life.

Rohinton Mistry who has been living in Canada since 1975 writes solely about Bombay and the Parsi community. His stores elucidate his diaspora consciousness where he mentions in depth details of the surrounding and Parsi culture. The way they live, their attitudes towards politics, religion, class, ethnicity and community are well depicted in his works. It appears as if he is presently living amongst the people about which he's writing. *The New York Times* comments on Mistry saying:

Rohinton Mistry's 11 intersecting short stories in "Swimming Lessons" centre on the Parsi inhabitants of Firozsha Baag, a walled-in lower-middle-class housing complex in Bombay. In this first book, Mr. Mistry, a young Indian writer now living in Toronto, treats the apartment block with such microscopic intensity that it makes the imaginary village of R. K. Narayan - an author to whom Mr. Mistry has been compared - seem like a vast metropolis. Skilfully



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interwoven into stories about the apartment inhabitants' domestic strivings are fearsome glints of the outside world: communal strife, dowry murders, colour prejudice. (Cooke)

His capturing of fine detailing of human actions and emotions paints a vivid picture of the apartment complex where these lifelike characters perform the actions that are happening in most of the parts of the country. His treatment of feelings of Rustomji and Mehroo describe the attributes of common man. The human pathos he depict in “One Sunday” makes one feeble and aghast at the same time which in turn fulfils his purpose of writing this piece of literature.

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