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Ram Lalit
Research Scholar, Dep. of
English & MEL University of
Allahabad, Uttar Pradesh.
India.

Gender politics/marginalisation of women in *Tales from Firozsha Baag*: A critical analysis

Ram Lalit

Abstract

This paper explores gender and politics as it is produced and enumerated by Rohinton Mistry in his *Tales from Firozsha Baag*. Mistry in this collection of short stories seems to analyse the females for hearth and men for offices and external affairs. This paper proposes to read *Tales from Firozsha Baag* with feminine perspective as they are shown by Mistry. The paper, however, focuses not simply on *Tales from Firozsha Baag* as it is narrated by Mistry but rather the Parsi women in our society. It will also try to propagate that to what extent Mistry shackles or liberates his women characters in *Tales from Firozsha Baag*. The methodology that has been applied in this paper is textual, social analysis with the perspective of feminism.

Keywords: Gender, Politics, Centre, Marginalization, Liberation, Circumscribed.

1. Introduction

Gender is a genetic trait based on sex: Biologically speaking, our sex is determined during the pregnancy process. Sex refers to the biological, chromosomal configuration resulting in physically observable sex characteristics.^[1] However, it is through gender socialization. It is society where the boys and the girls learn how to behave in particular society, culture and at particular place. Children may learn from social and cultural contact as well as from teachers, religion etc.

Mistry's novels are the embodiment of society, history, politics, culture, psychology, myth, tradition, religion etc. He generally deals with Parsi women characters' journey of life in multiple facets of society. He lets his women characters travel from the minute events to major events. He ushers in micro the macro cosmic patriarchal gender politics and marginalization of women. However, often times he sets his women characters in middle class or under privilege class of society. Depiction of women characters in down-trodden class needs a lot of research and analysis in which Mistry seems to achieve tremendous success. However, in this paper the basic intention is to examine the theme of "gender politics/marginalization of women/Eco-feminism" in Mistry's novels.

Women in every age, society, faith and religion have been subverted, suppressed, marginalized and thrown back to the purdah (veil). In majority, they are circumscribed to household works, since ancient age. They are regarded unholier, mild, weak, submissive, emotional, fearing, and unadventurous.

Kate Millet, in her *Sexual Politics* (1970) claims that there is always pulling for power and most of the institutions are possessed by men so all the social arrangements and institutions manipulate power to establish and perpetuate the 'dominance of men and sub-ordination of women'^[2]. Basically women are marginalized by men in every field, be it familial, religious, political, economic, social, legal and artistic. We find that Hebrew Bible and Greek writings, Islamic writing, Parsian writing, Hindu writing, women are placed at periphery. All the texts portray women as others because they lack 'masculinity'. The Feminists writers' emphasis is that women themselves have accepted and socialized themselves in 'patriarchal ideology'. So, they more contribute in their own substitution. The feminists claim that 'sex' is biological while gender is 'social construct'. Sex is determined by anatomy while gender is decided by society. As Simone de Beauvoir put it, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman...It is civilization as a whole that produces this creature...which is described as feminine"^[3]. However, by this cultural process, the masculine is accepted as 'active,

Correspondence:
Ram Lalit
Research Scholar, Dep. of
English & MEL University of
Allahabad, Uttar Pradesh.
India.

dominating, adventurous, rational, and creative' while women as 'passive, acquiescent, timid, emotional and conventional' [4].

Nilufer E Bharucha writes that "The Parsi women have not rigorously subjected to the regimen of the Purdah, but they share the limited and reductive world of their Hindu and Muslim sisters in India. Parsi traditions are rooted in the patriarchal society of ancient Iran and these patriarchal moorings have been reinforced by a 1300 year long residence in India. Association with the British during the Raj coated some Parsis with a thin Patina of Westernization and emancipation, but for the majority of Parsi women, the veil remained from the behind which they looked at the world. As Sherry B. Ortner has put it, "the secondary status of women in society is one of the true universal, a pan-cultural fact" [5]. However, Rohinton Mistry's *Tales from Firozsha Baag* is a collection of eleven stories. All his stories comprises quotidian of Parsi life. Parsi tradition, religion, alienation, modernity, family are the major themes around which the story revolves. Women are the chief exponents to knit the story and facilitating the family matters ahead. He does not develop the rounded character of women in Tales. The women characters in his *Tales from Firozsha Baag* are both old and young.

Commenting about Mistry's women characters, Gordon Ekelund states:

Mistry clearly casts his women characters as one of two types in a dichotomy that defines women as either pure and silent—suffering or malevolent-pativratas or treacherous wenches. This dichotomy transcends cultural boundaries and is strongly entrenched in Indian tradition [6].

His few of the women characters surpass the boundary of patriarchy and tradition and rectify them. Some characters accept the patriarchy and always help to make its grip stronger. The first story *Auspicious Occasion* starts with Rustomji and Mehroo. Rustomji is a paradoxical character who hangs between tradition and modernity. He always behaves like owner of Mehroo as he orders and shows his anger on Mehroo. As the story opens, we find that she is cooking, making children ready to go to school, preparing for agiary (for worship in fire temple as it is Navjote). Mehroo is shown as a domestic lady, always ready to serve her husband; she is emotional and believes in rituals, social norms. She is sixteen year old while her husband is thirty six year old. Rustomji was a successful lawyer, so he was considered a fine catch by her parents [7]. She also belongs to a very orthodox family and carries traditional orthodoxy with her:

Mehroo came, her slippers flopping in time-ploof ploof-one two. She was considerably younger to her husband, having been married off to a thirty-six year old man when she was a mere girl of sixteen, before completing her final high school year. Rustomji, a successful Bombay lawyer, had been considered a fine catch by Mehroo's parents- no one had anticipated that he would be wearing dentures by the time he was fifty [8].

Despite Parsis assume themselves to be most educated, liberal and women oriented society, we find that Mehroo is the victim of patriarchy. Mehroo runs as fast as her slippers allow but Rustomji calmly read The Times of India.

However, women are not only tortured and harassed in home as Rustomji exposes the main priest Dhunjisha, 'a salacious old man taking advantage of his venerable image', 'loves to touch and feel women, the old goat—the younger and

fleshier, the more fun he has hugging and squeezing them'. He claims that the priest exchanges lewd remarks amidst scriptural recitals especially on days of ceremony [9]. He says that Ashem Vahoo was his favourite example:

"Ashem Vahoo

See the tits on that chikie boo..." [10].

Mehroo is frightened on seeing the murder of the priest in the "Fire Temple". But Rustomji is unfrightened and remains calm. Once again Mistry shows the submissiveness of women as both Mehroo and Rustomji have travelled the same distance and Mehroo did all—cooking, mopping, preparing children to go to school and went in the kitchen in order to prepare tea for Rustomji. She never takes tea,' but she makes an exception that day for the sake of Rustomji and takes tea that's why Mistry portrays her as ideal and 'pativrata': She prepared two cups of tea. Between 10 a.m. and 4 p.m. She never drank tea; it was one of her strictest rules. Today, for Rustomji's sake, she would make an exception" [11].

However, Mistry does not only portray middle class Parsi women and gender politics in this story, but also incorporates Hindu women's who visit the Parsi homes as servants. Generally Parsis call them Ganga, Tanoo, Mala etc. they are treated as things and we find that Parsis like Rustomji keep lusty eyes on these servants. As Mistry narrates "Rustomji enjoyed watching gajra modify her sari each morning before she started work" [12]. He has listened to his father and other Parsi members singing the lines in the parties. Those were derogatory to the servants. The second story *One Sunday* deals with the female characters like Najamai, Tehmina and Sillo Boyce. Najamai is an old lady; her daughters (Dolly and Veera) have gone abroad for studies. She lives all alone and uses fridge as a connecting medium to her neighbours. She remains fearful to the outsiders and intruders. They are marginalized in the society as they are never explored to the celebrating at public places.

The third story *The Ghost of Firozsha Baag* circulates around Jakeline, a goan. Her seth call her Jaakaylee. She is presented as an ayah to a Parsi family and she feels proud in it. Once again a woman character appreciated for her womanly qualities as for cooking and humiliated by both male and female due to her colour. "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 Jaykaalee" [13]. She says "I was saying it was very lucky for me to become ayah in a Parsi house" [14]. It symbolises that she is very submissive lady and does not dare to defy patriarchy. However, she is visited at night by a mischievous ghost but when she tells about the ghosts' visit to seth and bai, all of them mock at her and once again a women is not taken seriously. Once again Mistry shows women to be fearful and trapped in magic, superstition and ghosts.

Daulat Mirza in *Condolence Visit* is the character who defies the tradition and patriarchy she is newly widowed and according to the Parsi tradition, when 'Dusmoo prayers were prayed at the fire temple' [15]. The well-wishers and relatives visit the home of the deceased. Daulat Mirza became very worried that she will have to 'gratify them with answers' [16]. She pines and regrets for not accepting the tape-recorder offered as a gift by Sarosh. She feels that it may save her from the questions of the people:

"You have come to ask about my life, my suffering, my sorrow? Here, take and listen. Listen on the machine, everything is on tape. How my Minocher fell sick, where it started to pain, how much it hurt, what doctors said, what

specialist said, what happened in hospital. This R button?" [17]. In *Collectors*, we find two characters Mrs. Mody and Mrs. Bulsara. They have totally confined themselves to the kitchen work. They are always shown thinking and acting for the welfare of their sons and husbands. They have lost their identity to such an extent that Mistry does not consider important to introduce them by their names but they are always referred by their husband's surname.

Rohinton Mistry in *Paying Guests* dwells upon two types of women characters; one is emotional, submissive, young and newly married Kashmira while another one is an old and ill-mannered Khorshed Bai. Khorshed Bai lives as a paying guest in Kashmira's house. Kashmira lives in a tiny room so she wants Khorshed Bai to evict her. But Khorshed Bai denies evicting the room and she takes the matter to the court. Khorshed Bai does all the cruel things to disturb and to make Kashmira's life miserable. Through this story, Mistry points out the problem faced by women. Khorshed Bai's son has gone abroad, never takes care of her, so she is in penury and bound to live as paying guest: "A right to what? Put us on the street? Don't we have rights? At last to have a roof, eat a little daal-roti and finish our days in peace..." [18].

Mistry is of the view that women are not always emotional, kind hearted and submissive. The harsh aspect of women can be observed in Khorshed Bai who gets chance and closes Kashmira's infant baby in a parrot cage. Kashmira is breathless and searches throughout the whole building and weeps bitterly: "Inside, Khorshed Bai was leaning over the locked parrot cage...The neighbours looked with curiosity that turned to horror...Ardesar sat on a chair with his face hidden in his hands...The baby, liberated from the swaddling clothes, was inside the cage" [19].

2. Conclusion

Henceforth, with the class analysis of Mistry's women characters, it becomes quite clear that women are marginalised and dragged powerless in every aspect of society. Knowingly, or unknowingly, Mistry himself does not let any female character develop thoroughly. We may say that the women are not marginalised only in life but in short stories too. Except one or two, all of the female characters are stereotyped and chained strongly in it; and those who are exceptions are not portrayed as courageous as men characters.

In *Tales from Firozsha Baag*, Mistry hangs between stereotyped and overpowering women but he remains intact to stereotype. But later in *Family Matters*, he knits a character Daisy Iecheporia who plays violin, self-dependent etc. Nilufer E Bharucha says that "she is the only character who had achieved much in her career without the support of a man—a commendable feat indeed. She has got the spirit to carry forward, achieving higher goals" [20].

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