

Socio-economic Conditions Of Domestic Workers in 'Tales From FirozshaBaag' By Rohinton Mistry
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Abstract

Mistry's characters are drawn mainly from Parsi community. His works deal with Parsi culture, traditions and rituals. In his works, he endeavors to represent details of the way of life and culture of the Parsis. To develop the plot, he also incorporates other characters in his works as Hindus, Muslims and Christians. The problem of domestic workers is one of the several issues raised by Rohinton Mistry in his works. As a domestic worker, a man and a woman has no control over his or her life. They receive no respect. Domestic workers have no rights. Their jobs fall in the category of the lowest kind of work. To provide for their families and themselves, thousands of men and women around the world turn to domestic work. They have to face multiple abuses in private homes by the hands of employers, it includes sexual and physical exploitation and psychological trauma and they have to work for longer hours, no payment of wages and forced labor. The present study aims at understanding the socio-economic conditions of domestic workers in the collection of short stories by Mistry. The paper reveals frightening prevalence of abuses against domestic workers. To fulfill the objective, I have taken only three short stories namely, 'Auspicious Occasion', 'One Sunday' and 'The Ghost of FirozshaBaag' from 'Tales From FirozshaBaag'.

Keywords: *Socio-economic, Realism, Marginal, Discrimination, Voyeurism, Powerless.*

Reference to this paper should
be made as follows:

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Naim Ahmad,**

*Socio-economic Conditions
of Domestic Workers in 'Tales
From FirozshaBaag' By
Rohinton Mistry*

Notions Dec. 2020,
Vol. XI, No. II,
Article No.20 pp. 96 - 103

[https://anubooks.com/
notions-vol-xi-no-2-july-dec-
2020/](https://anubooks.com/notions-vol-xi-no-2-july-dec-2020/)

Introduction

Mistry's preferred style is realism, a technique of the truthful depiction of reality. It centers on exhibiting mainly the middle or lower class society's diurnal or day to day pursuits of life. In this way, Mistry tries to show the multiple issues and evils which are prevalent in our society.

“He chooses to alter narrative perspectives and to introduce a multiplicity of perspectives within an overall omniscient realist narrative. He focuses on the human condition, located in time and space: the Parsi middle class in suburban Bombay and rural migrants. The humanism of his narration and the grandness of his narrative tapestry give a universal dimension to his characters, who, therefore, become embodiments of universal human condition.” (Dewnarain 1)

Mistry's writings indicate sensitivity to both the faults and the cruelties of this world. He proceeds to record the brutalities of urban and rural India. Mistry's major or minor characters are the personification of perpetual struggle to preserve the stability against absurdity of the real. Mistry shows literary and exquisite sensibility of compassion for the poor. Most of his dramatic personae are portrayed with a sense of unpleasant realism. Mistry does not hesitate to exhibit their prejudices, imperfections and cruelties.

In “Tales From FirozshaBaag”, Mistry raises many social concerns and issues as Parsis' struggle to maintain their ethnic identity in a Hindu dominated country, subaltern issues, elderly problems, migration issues and oppression of the marginal etc. Persecution of domestic workers is one such issue as raised in the collection of short stories by him. The circumstances of domestic workers are vulnerable in our society. Multiple factors are responsible for this condition as the wages rate they get, racial discrimination, gender prejudices, poor economic background, seasonal work, no bargaining power, abuses of drugs, male partner's addiction to drug, death of husband, having no property and sexual harassment by the employers.

‘Auspicious Occasion’ is the first story in ‘Tales From FirozshaBaag’ which is about Rustomji and his wife, Mehroo. The story begins with the couple facing the problem of WC. Rustomji is the protagonist of the story. Mehroo is considerably younger than her husband. She was only sixteen when she was married to him and Rostumji was thirty six years old, a successful Bombay lawyer. Rostumji is the employer of Tanoo and Gajra. Tanoo is the first maid servant at Rustomji's home who comes to sweep and mop at Rostumji's flat. Rostumji calls her ‘Ganga’ or ghatias a racial slur used by Parsis to undermine non-Parsis. “His contempt against the non-

Parsi servants is undercut by his lustful fantasies for the maid Gajra whom he pejoratively defines as ghati.” (Wadhawan 51) Rustomji addresses ‘Ghati’ not only to Tanoo and Gajra but all Hindus. Thus, his maid servants are the victim of Rustomj’s sense of superiority. Rustomji shows no respect towards his domestic servants. *“Rustomji covertly lust after his cleaning lady- always called Gunga by Parsis, irrespective of her actual name.”* (Dodiya 26) Rustomji goes in WC to relieve himself. He barely sat when someone pulled the flush from lavatory upstairs, *“Then on my head I felt – pchuk – all wet! On my head “* He yells at Mehroo, *“coming coming! Two hands, so much to do, ganga is late and the house is unswept.”* He responded her as *“Arre forget your ganga- banga!”*Rustomji’s using of derogatory term to his servants is obvious time and again in the story. Domestic workers’ working hours are not limited. They have to work for longer in the evening and they can be called to do work earlier than usual.

Rustomji demeans the community of domestic workers, suggesting Mehroo, *“Never let Ganga know, if a particular day is important, pretend everything is normal. And never ask her to come earlier than usual for she will deliberately come late,”* (8, 9) Mehroo was explained repeatedly by Rostumji about the psychology of gungas. Tanoo is in her early seventies, a septuagenarain woman. Eventually, Tanoo decides to return her village which she left long ago. She had no home to live in, no property to be owned. Rest of her life is to be passed with her sister’s family there.

She has health complications due to declining years, ***“So plates and saucers continued to slip out of Tanoo’s old, weary hands, continued to crash and shatter, causing Rostumji’s fiscal grief.”*** (9)

She is too old to work properly and continued to break a dish or a cup or a saucer. Despite her oldness, she has to work to feed herself. She is frequently intimidated by pay cuts and grimmer forms of penalty. But in spite of her resolution and good intention, there is no improvement in her activities. It is because of her long unhappiness, she faced in her life. Her husband fled bearing her two children and she single-handedly raised them but these two children now are drunkards, lazy good-for-nothings and the sorrow of her old age. Mehroo would say, *“Poor, poor Tanoo, helpless to do anything, very sad.”* Eventually, Tanoo decides to return her village which she left long ago. She had no home to live in, no property to be owned. Rest of her life is to be spent with her sister’s family there. After Tanoo had departed, Gajra arrived. She is young and luscious, thought Rustomji. To Rustomji Gajra is a symbol of sex, she is plump, luscious and voluptuous. This is what the employers thought about their young maid servant .Gajra is the victim of voyeurism. Rustomji

never tired to go into the kitchen while Gajra performing domestic chores, *“And he did not tire to go into the kitchen while Gajra washing dishes, crouched on her haunches within the parapet of the mori.”* (11) Rustomji secretly peeps her while she doing work. He voluptuously thinks whether she is wearing underwear or brassiere or knickers. He stealthily gazes her breasts which she would tuck back the ample bosom into her chole. Rustomji visualizes her breasts as two prime Ratnagiri mangoes, juicy and golden smooth.

“Gajra provided further proof, proof which popped out from beneath Her short blouse during the exertion of sweeping and washing, with A deft movement she would tuck back ample bosom into her choli, unabashed but not before Rustomji had gazed his fill.” (11)

He fervently anticipated that one day Gajra’s breast should be revealed from her choli to expose her nipples. In his depths, he pines to see her nipples and imagines them and prays from ‘Dada Ormuzd’ to let him see the nipples of Gajra, but once.

“He would yearn in his depths, trying to picture the nipples, now dark brown and the size of a gram but with the hidden power to swell, now uncontrollably aroused and black, large and pointed.” (11)

Rustomji secretly sees Gajra and anticipates his desire may come true. Before she works, Gajra does many activities, she adjusts her sari, she pulls sari up between her thighs and tucks it around the waist so that the sari might not get drench in the dirty water of drain. This kind of adjustment produces a very large masculine lump over the crotch, while doing all these activities, Rustomji surreptitiously sees Gajra, all these movements and different angles of her body extremely erotic for Rustomji. Because of Mehroo’s presence there, Rustomji pretends to read the ‘Times of India’, “looking surreptitiously from behind or over or under and taking his chances.” (12) The couple is facing the problem of lavatory leakage by using Hirabai’s telephone. He hopes that Gajra would arrive before Mehroo returns calling the office so that he may ogle, brazenly uninterrupted. But Mehroo comes back before Rustomji’s impure thoughts fulfill, *“sulking Rustomji returned to ‘The Times of India’.”*

‘One Sunday’ is the second story in ‘*Tales From FirozshaBaag*’. Najamai is the central character in the story, a widow of 55 years old. All the characters in the story are Parsis except Francis. Francis is a marginal character who works for anyone not only in C block but also in FirozshaBaag who needs his service. Francis does odd jobs. He is not a regular domestic worker, but he works for anybody who

needs him. He is an orphan. He runs errands for anybody in the FirozshaBaag and lives off the leftovers of the apartment residents. He was dismissed from his delivery boy job. Since then, he has been doing odd jobs. He has no home of his own to accommodate. He has no property to be called of his own. He has to seek shelter under the awning of the store. He has no permanent job. No one shows sympathy towards him but everyone wants to get him to work. Kersi and Percy, the son of Mrs. Boyce are friendly towards him but this behavior of the two is anathema to her, ***"It was not proper for a Parsi boy to consort in this way with a man who was really no better than a homeless beggar, who would starve were it not for their thoughtfulness in providing him with odd jobs. No good would come of it."*** (35)

Najamai usually leaves the keys with Tehmina and Boyces. Both are entitled right to use her fridge. Tehmina goes to Najamai's flat at midday to bring some ice for her scotch. But she is unable to lock the door due to her poor eyesight. Meanwhile, Francis approaches her. Tehmina rebukes and abuses him and asks him to lock the door. Francis had not eaten anything for two days. This is why he is skulking there, ***"Stop staring, you idiot and check if this door is properly locked."*** (31) Francis asked Tehmina meekly and fearfully, *"Yes bai. But when will Najamai return? She said she would give me some work today."* (31) Najamai comes back to her flat in the late of the night and she steps in her flat, she hears some sounds and anticipates of the presence of the thief in her flat and she shouts for help. Tehmina and her son, Kersi rush for her help in no time and calculate that it must be Francis, Francis goes to Tar Gully, Kersi and Percy follows him to nab him. Eventually, they found him in the street and a number of people gathered around them. They beat him for a crime he did not plan to commit.

***"The pathos of his unnecessary punishment is conveyed through
The perspective of Kersi- one of two Boyces' children – who, while
Francis is being beaten up, recognized him, as a comprehension
in
the eyes of poor Francis."*** (Dewnarain 9)

Percy notices Francis and yells 'Chor! Chor! Stop him'. Hearing this Matka patrons stir into action. Poor Francis, unable to escape, is nabbed. Without bothering to know what had happened, they begun to punch him. This hullabaloo gathers a throng about

them. Then the others joined in the punching and beating. The crowd slapped, kicked, twisted Francis' arms, pulled his hair and he was abused.

While returning to FirozshaBaag, Francis has to pass before the tethered cow, grocery shop, overflowing gutters of Tar Gully and everyone tries to punch on his back and head. Francis was in tears when he reached Najamai.

“Suddenly, a neighbour stepped out of the croud and slapped him hard across the face; you budmaash! You have no shame? Eating her food, earning money from her, then stealing from her, you rascal?” (43)

Francis began to weep and collapse at Najamai feet. He begged Najamai not to let the crowd beat him and allowed her to do anything with him. While Francis knelling and begging before Najamai, a Muslim servant kicked Francis strongly in the ribs. “*Francis yelped like a dog and keeled over*” Thus, the story exposes the insecurities of the powerless and how the power is asserted by the powerful over *the* powerless and sometimes even by powerless as the Muslim servant does.

‘The Ghost of FirozshaBaag’ is the third story in the collection of short stories. Jaakaylee is the protagonist of the story. She is an ayah, 63 years old from Goa who had migrated from there to escape from unemployment and arrived in Mumbai. She works in the flat of a Parsi family. Jaakaylee was fourteen years old when she was employed there. Forty nine years have passed since she was employed in the Parsi Family. Jaakaylee's bai and seth distort her name and pronounce her name inaccurately, Jaakaylee instead Jacqueline. They don't care to learn how to say Jacqueline correctly. Nowadays, Jaakaylee converses in Parsi-Gujrati and a little bit in English. Earlier to this, she used to speak Konkani.

“When he was little I sang Konkani songs for him. Mogacha Mary and HanvSaiba. Big man now, he's forgotten them and so have I. Forgetting

now my language, my songs.” (52)

In her old age, she has to grind masala on the stone. The employer does not provide her with an automatic machine. Though, they are very rich people. He is a chartered accountant. Their family has many luxurious items, such as a nice motor car. But they don't buy the grinder. She feels pain in her shoulders while grinding the masala. ***“O! it pains in my old shoulders, grinding this masala, but they will never buy the automatic machine. Very rich people, my bai-seth.” (54)***

Jaakalee has not been allowed to sleep on a cot. She has to do all the works on the floor, grinding masala, cutting vegetables and cleaning utensils, she has to do it on the floor. She sleeps on the floor. She eats food on the floor.

“Life as ayah means living close on floor..... nowadays my weight is much more than it used to be, and is getting very difficult to get up from floor. But I am managing” (51)

Jaakalee has to face color discrimination because she is from the south. Her color is dark. All the people in Tar Gully call her 'Blackie, blackie,' and when a baby takes birth if it has a fair complexion, they would say, "O how nice light skin like parents. But if it dark skin they say, arre what is this ayah no chhokro, ayah's child." (53)

Mistry shows the vulnerable condition of domestic workers in the selected stories. Their economic position is weak. They can hardly make both ends meet from whatever they earn. They are paid insufficient salary. They have to face racial, religious and color discrimination. Psychological trauma, economic and emotional exploitation are the common issues that domestic workers encounter by the hands of the employers. Their working hours are not determined. They can be called any time when they are needed. They have no home to live in and no property of their own. When Gajra departs from Rustomji's flat due to old age and she is unable to do domestic chores as she is in her early seventies, she goes to live with her sister's family to pass rest of her life in the village. Francis is homeless and he has to seek shelter in the night

under the owning. Jaakaylee sleeps and does everything on the floor of her seth and bai's flat. Domestic workers are frequently threatened with pay cuts if they commit mistakes. Our society gives them no respect. Derogatory terms are used for them. The names of domestic workers are distorted by their employers. If the workers belong to different races, the employers do not try to pronounce their names correctly. The need of the hour is to eliminate the chasm between domestic workers and their employers. To achieve the purpose, the norms of equality need to be established. There must be no discrimination against them despite their color, race, religion and language. Their living and working conditions must be improved. Minimum wages act must be enacted. Strict rules against domestic exploitation must be framed. Their work must be appreciated. In this way, their aspirations and expectations can be met in the future.

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