

## CHALLENGES OF MULTI-CULTURAL IDENTITY IN THE INDIAN DIASPORA: FROM A LITERARY PERSPECTIVE OF ROHINTON MISTRY

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### *Abstract*

*This paper attempts to show how Rohinton Mistry, as an important figure among the writers in the Indian Diaspora, has tried to reveal various concerns of diasporic minority in his own homeland India through his English fiction writing. As a Parsi Zoroastrian, Rohinton Mistry was born in Bombay (India), the place he had left in 1975 with his wife for migrating into Toronto (Canada). On being a Parsi in India and then an immigrant in another country, Mistry distinguishes himself in multiple displacements. This is the reason why his novels articulate the pursuit of identity, connection to the original land, and multiculturalism on the Canadian location in diasporas to put questions about the feelings of home and belonging. Even His Identity is hyphenated as Indian–Canadian Parsi, which reflects in all his works containing a recording of the multifaceted tradition of Parsi history. The way he depicts the Parsis culture, their habits, and customs is unique. In charting the lives of Parsis through his fiction, he assumes the role of an ethnographer. Thus, this paper aims to indicate his purpose of fictionalizing the trials and tribulations of an ethnic community and presenting it as comparable counterparts for the West's literary traditions within the multicultural agenda.*

**Keywords :** *Diaspora, Migration, Multicultural Identity, Rohinton Mistry, and Parsis Culture.*

### INTRODUCTION

All diasporas discussions as also insightful discourse of Diaspora fictional literature came into being through the philosophy of post-colonial theory. The reasons are not far to seek. By and large, the fiction of diasporas is replete with issues related to movement, dislocations, crossing borders, multiple identities, cross-cultures, homeland, and receptive land, etc. The settler societies like the USA and Canada come to examine the cultural onslaught resulting from waves after waves of settlers after settlers. Obviously, the power to regulate and govern cultural, political, and social relationships has emerged.

The diasporic fiction is thus required to be sponsored, validated, and interpreted across borders. The writers like Rohinton Mistry become beneficiaries of the prevalent discursive practices in the countries of adoption. Mistry is allowed not only to exercise economic preferences but also to gain intellectual and cultural gratification. His migration has made that possible. However, the act of crossing over makes him prey to pressures from both the sending and receiving cultures. It has also turned him into transnational subjects. This paper attempts to show how Rohinton Mistry, as an important figure among the writers in the Indian Diaspora, has tried to reveal the lifelong journey of being a diaspora community in India through his English fiction writing. As he has, in an interview with Ali Lakhani, anticipated his writing would “preserve a record of how they lived, to some extent.” ( Barucha, 1996, p. 23-31) Indeed, His novels portray the canvas of relationships among self-identity, place, and community.

As a Parsi Zoroastrian, Rohinton Mistry was born in Bombay (India), the place he had left in 1975 with his wife for migrating into Toronto (Canada). On being a Parsis in India and then an immigrant in another country, Mistry distinguishes himself as one of those Indian authors “who have to grapple with not just one diasporic displacement but multiple displacements.” (Bharucha, 2003, p. 14) This is the reason why his novels articulate the pursuit of identity, connection to the original land, and multiculturalism on the Canadian location in diasporas to put questions about the feelings of home and belonging. He is away from his centre, that is India, but in no way could he be thought of as a victim of any 'dispersal.' Nor could he be entertaining the idea of 'returning.' Due to its sheer size and importance as cultural presence, Mistry has depicted diasporic experiences, the enormous pain of not being with his own community. Even His Identity is hyphenated as Indian–Canadian Parsi, which reflects in all his works containing a recording of the multifaceted tradition of Parsi history.

The issue of typology is possibly frustrating and challenging, but not, in the final analysis, of many consequences. Mistry is an Indian, Canadian, and Diasporic much more. Literary historians are likely to be puzzled by the fact that much of his writings in the last two decades have been about India and not Canada, although he has lived in Canada since 1975. He has shown his consciousness to express a reliable image of postcolonial India through his novels. According to John Annie,

Diasporic writers paint the vastness and the complexities of the home country, which contains everything in multitudes-multiple truths, multiple crisis, multiple realities, and this diversity is portrayed for the world wide reading public, and chiefly for the Indians. (Annie, 2012, p. 30)

His permanent agenda is to preserve and present his community through his fiction. In chronicling the community for the other nation, he writes into the culture of diaspora while narrating stories of his community, culture, and homeland. Meenakshi Mukherji believes that ‘...while the narratives emerge out of a culture, they also contribute towards the construction of definition of this culture. Stories and communities are thus bound together in a symbolic relationship.’(p.155) His diasporic status is justified by a few stories in his first short stories collection, titles as *Tales from Firozshah Baag* (1987), although the overall quantity of diasporic literature is meagre in his corpus. Nevertheless, having left India, he can hardly be called Indian in the way other diasporic writers like Arundhati Roy are Indian. Since he does not write about Canada, he can hardly be called Canadian in the sense that Margaret Atwood is local. For literary historians and postcolonial critics, such anomalies constitute problems that are not easily resolved. Literary histories of Canada have been confronted with the task of finding a rationale for including or excluding migrant writers, but that has no direct bearing on the artistic strength or aesthetic value of individual works.

After moving to Canada at the age of twenty-three, Mistry once again returns to his own land India for subject matters, and themes in his fiction represents the displaced features of migration. Indeed, one can witness in his writing a profound sense of this movement sublime, a writing that narrates the double vision obtained, in part, from his particular Indian location and through his Canadian sojourn. Even as a sense of difference in Canadian culture and the other complexities of non-Indian milieu compel him to return back to the imaginary homeland of India. The society, wherein the Parsis struggle other cultural clashes in their own country India, directs him to the particular perpetuation of the Zoroastrian religion.

Historically, the Parsis community, following the Zoroastrian religion, came to India after the Arab conquest of Iran. The point of their entry was Gujarat. They were active in the world of business and politics. Hinnells and Williams also inform us about this exiled community in the face “of Islamic persecution after the Arab conquest of Iran in the seventh century, and perhaps being aware of trading opportunities on the coast of north-west India,” the Parsis immigrated to the Indian Subcontinent 1200 years ago. (2008, p.1) In this sense, such forcible circumstances make this community a ‘Diaspora’ in India itself. They are the successors of the minority of Zoroastrians who did not compromise with the Arabs to give up their religion and customs following the repeated attacks on the Persian Empire between 638A.D. and 641A.D. As a result, they were forced to stay on the periphery of the empire, and their brave attempts at resistance did not succeed. flight was the only option left for them. They embarked on a long journey to India, carrying urns containing their sacred fires, which was worshipped in their monotheistic religion. They reached Diu in Gujarat by a sea route circa 756 A.D. In Gujarat, this fire worshipping community was called Parsis on the basis of its language Farsi. The Parsi eventually moved to a coastal town called Sanjan, where they made a pact with the local ruler Jadav Rana and were given permission to settle there, under some conditions:

1. The Parsis would have to give up their native Persian language and speak the local language.
2. The men would lay down their weapons.
3. The Parsis high priest would have to explain their religion to the king.
4. The Parsis would hold their wedding processions only in the dark.
5. The women would exchange their Persian robes for Indian costumes. ( Bharucha, 2003 , p. 25-26)

These compromises involve an unsympathetic cultural loss for the Parsi- Zoroastrians. When they landed in Sanjan hundreds of years ago seeking refuge in Gujarat, they were allowed to do so, but they had to pay a high price for it. These asymmetrical conditions created feelings of alienation from India among them. Consequently, they began to identify themselves and were identified as migrants or outsiders who still were longing for their long lost ethnic-cultural

values. During the British raj in colonial India, they viewed the issue of independence with mixed feelings, since many of them identified with western culture. Looking like westernized, they were recognized almost utterly with the colonial masters. There was regret for the passing of an old way of life and this community linked their transformed social fortunes to the British's flight. Bharucha writes;

These unequal conditions provided fertile breeding ground for feelings of ambivalence and alienation from the host country. This ambivalence and alienation became exacerbated during the colonial period, when the Parsis were among the first to embrace English language education and become the most westernized Indian community. (qtd. in Kapadia, 2001, p.16)

This, in turn, has become a cause of many conflicts in postcolonial India where their economic and social position has been much dishonored, many prompting Parsis to move to the West and shed their Indian identities. As a result, a sort of psychological disturbance has been remaining among this community.

#### **CHALLENGES OF 'IN-BETWEEN' IDENTITY: CENTRAL THEME**

For the most part, studies about his works have been thematic, and critics have felt the need to explicate the particular circumstances of Mistry on being a Parsi and a Canadian as a necessary preface to any form of exegesis. Sharmani Patricia Gabriel, for instance, makes the observation that 'while most minority migrant writers speak of their experiences of alienation in Canada, Mistry, as a Canadian of Parsi ethnicity, has experienced national exclusion not only in Canada but also in his Indian homeland' (Gabriel, 2004, p. 28). The Parsi Baag that Mistry grew up in might be a distinctive feature of the Bombay landscape, but it is, as Mistry's fiction shows, at once unifying and isolating. As those who came from elsewhere and who were westernized during colonialism, Parsis have not been able to lay a claim to insider status.

Mistry's experiences of multicultural identity due to his Parsi ethnicity and an Indian immigrant in Canada have motivated his enthusiasm for non-essentialist cultural politics and other diaspora issues in his writing. Significantly, the successive generations of the writers have exhibited a keen interest in the recent past than the remote past, which is a seminal and phenomenal departure from the tradition. On being evaluated his writings with those of other diasporic novelists, Mistry promptly engrossed contemplation on the subject of the conflicting cultural spaces possessed by his characters.

The immigrant's life in the world of 'double diaspora' engages with the existence of something beyond one nation-state. His multiple identities have raised some vital questions related to the belonging, ethnicity, nation, migrancy, diaspora, identity, and multiculturalism that have been central to the post-colonialism. The case of expatriate Indian writer had been debated much

earlier by theorists as well as writers, especially concerning their homelessness or sense of outsider attitude. Mistry's works have a very controlled structure that represents a facet of the new reality of the immigrant, the silence of the new life, and the new relationship that need to be forged.

Although he has now resided in Canada, it is his nurturing in Bombay that is directly seen in all his fictions. In a 1989 interview with Geoff Hancock for Canadian Fiction Magazine, Mistry describes his life in three sentences; 'I grew up in Bombay. Now I am here. I The distinct Bombay culture, particularly the Parsi way of life, portrayal of the sons of the soil and even the politics of India are in his writings he often tries to revise the history of his homeland.' In an interview, when asked why India persistently occurs in his work? He answered that it is very naïve to assume that you go to a new country, and you start a new life, and its new chapter-it is not. Canada is the middle of the book. At some point, you have to write the beginning? And the beginning for Mistry has been India.

His writings and life, compelling comparison between the present narratives of diaspora and earlier ones, caution us in opposition to show the present phase of diaspora as an entirely latest phenomenon. The history of Zoroastrians that he reinscribes in his oeuvre shows that people did migrate in the past though their reasons for moving might have been different. For Mistry, the community of Parsi writers in Canada embodies the modern and old discourse of diaspora respectively. Exiled, immigrants or expatriates are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back, even at the risk of being mutated in the pillars of salt. But if we do look back, we must also do so in the knowledge.

As he is a diasporic writer, writes about immigrant experiences and cultural dilemma. Presenting the examples of multiculturalism and its effects, his character struggles for the quest for identity in the foreign soil. It has to be accepted that nation is the site for all cultural transactions from where control and domination are also exercised through multicultural agenda.

Being a multiculturalist, he has, very attentively, kept in mind his community's cultural journey with a sense of reminiscence. As a writer observed about him;

Mystry draws a human world of sounds and smells, locations and dislocations, colourful speech and cultural mores for reading as resistance in the postcolonial paradigm. Mistry's writing thus also becomes a kind of 'writing back' to a dominant community's culture and practices that necessitate a writer's commitment and responsibility. Much in the postmodern vein, Mistry seeks to reinvent buried and alternate meanings hagemonised by India's master-narratives, to impose a narrative mode of historical and political re-structuring of experience. ( Nelson, 2000, p.238-39)

*Family Matters* is the third and the latest novel dispersed in 2002 in the line of revealing the ethno-religious minority attributes. He depicts the nearby change and clerical class family matters of a Parsi gathering of Bombay amidst the burden torn years of post Babri Masjid obliteration period in Nineteen Nineties. *Family Matters* crosses the point of confinement of nation, ethnicity, and times and achieves comprehensiveness by taking up the topical issues, for instance, geriatrics and disapproving, familial subjugation and human relationship, cosmopolitan city life, secularism, degradation and communalism, persisting and downfall, development, irritation and sentiment belongingness et cetera. As this gathering is standing up to physical and social disposal, Parsi researchers needed to record their social markers in masterful expression. Subsequently, their ethnic uneasiness and social flexibility wind up doubtlessly imperative subjects in advance of Parsi scholars. It would not be an exaggeration to maintain because of the vital element of social realism; *Family Matters* drives its migration to the appeal and sympathetic consideration in the 'other' world. The novel being discussed and other works by Mistry are revision.

It is more so in Mistry's case because of his Indian descent as the immigrant can be an immigrant legally but not culturally. Moreover, to an immigrant dwelling in two worlds, reality appears as an artifact, and it has to be realized. This is very much visible in his works; *A Fine Balance*, *Such a Long Journey*, and *The Tales from Ferozshah Baag*.

Immigrant writers residing in the host land are victims of the 'in-between' syndrome. Being far away from the home cultural heritage, they are embedded with the 'other' culture. Therefore the feeling of 'in-between' or living on the periphery, not being a part of but almost being a parasite upon society, is generated.

Within this context, it becomes necessary to mention and examine the implications of some of the definitions of Diaspora. Accepted and established as the definitions, maybe, what needs to be ascertained is their validity as literary tools. Beginning on a simple note, Walker Connor, for whom Diaspora means 'that segment of people living outside the homeland.' (Connor, 1986, p.16) Naïve as it appears, the definition is loaded. To elaborate, the word 'segment' itself is suggestive of the minority to which Rohinton Mistry belongs.

## CONCLUSION

In India, the general post-colonial representations have always been augmented by the specific issues related to the minority groups, which leads to a better understanding of a multifarious culture that defies homogenization. To turn to diaspora fiction proper, Rohinton Mistry's works are placed and examined within the context above. Examining the whole sequence of events, each character and each conversation in detail would amount to surroundings each work of

fiction to diaspora theory. Accordingly, his fictions affirm and confirm not only the protagonists but also the other characters within the cultural site i.e., Indian. Through their mediatory role as fiction, it is possible for the novels to represent the diasporic self in the Canadian literary culture.

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