

A Study of Diasporic Divulgencies in the Works of Rohinton Mistry

Dr. Rashmi Dubey

Assistant Professor

Department of English

D.B.S. College,

Kanpur, Uttar Pradesh, India

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Abstract

Diaspora fiction deals with the issues of two different social milieus having discriminating margins, disintegration or combination of cultures and is also lingers over the related feelings such as nostalgia, loneliness, alienation, existential rootlessness, homelessness, quest of identity, protest, assertions and questioning etc. Rohinton Mistry is one such writer who is well known for his depiction of these psycho-sociological problems by the emigrants and immigrants. Rohinton belongs to the Parsi Zoroastrain religious minority while residing in Brampton, Ontario, Canada. Being himself a victim, most of his works are concerned to scrutinize the complexities of contemporary rootlessness and alienated identities of the Parsi community he describes. While in India these Parsis are called “Ghatis” and when they move towards the United States and Canada, they are called “Pakis”, and Mistry considers both of them to be dehumanizing. He raises voice against the victimization of these emigrants and immigrants and highlights their struggle also.

Keywords- Diaspora, Immigrant, Rohinton Mistry, Rootlessness, Alienation

“A diaspora is a scattered population whose origin lies in a separate geographic locale. Historically, the world diaspora was used to refer to the involuntary mass dispersion of a population from its indigenous territories, in particular the dispersion of Jews.” ‘DIASPORA’ this word is first used in English in late 19th century and is originated from the Greek ‘diaspeirein’ suggesting scattering or dispersion. Before the sixth century B.C. Jews were scattered during the Babylonian captivity. Firstly this term is used to describe the condition of those Jews. But now-a-days this word is used in a much broader sense. Cambridge Dictionary describes diaspora as, “a group of people who spread from one original country to other countries or the act of spreading in this way.”

There may be several reasons for the dispersion of people from one place to another. But the person crossing the borders, has to face adversities; sacrifices, fixities; alienation; compromises and loss of one's own homeland and longing for it. There is a permanent feeling of ‘otherness’ for the place of dwelling in the psyche of the person. Whenever an immigrant lands in a new land, the first thing he faces is his Identity Crisis, as is said by Pranjape, “Since Diaspora writing emanates from identity formation leading to further and more

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sophisticated articulation of identity, or manifest in community, nationhood, and also large global contexts, it is important to remember and perceive Diaspora space as at all time explanatory, fluid and dynamic so that intersections within histories, past and futures do not congeal into rigid boundary laden states.” (Paranjape, 2001, 59)

There are various categories of this diaspora as diaspora by ethnic group, diaspora by refugees, diaspora by expatriates, diaspora by traders, diaspora by origin country and so on. But as far as diasporic literature is concerned, it includes all those writers who are living and writing outside their homeland but from the core of their heart they remain attached to their own land. And we are reminded of the words of Hutcheon that diasporic literature is the, “.... literature that is openly aware of the fact that it is written and read as part of a particular culture, having as much to do with the literary past as with the social present.” (Hutcheon, 1988, 12). Diaspora writers suffer from the agony of leaving behind their homes and their heart aches whenever they memorise their motherland as William Safran says that, - “they continue to relate personally or vicariously, to the homeland in a way or another and their ethnic-communal consciousness and solidarity are importantly defined by the existence of such a relationship.” (Saffron, 1991: 23).

Indian Diaspora is said to be enriched with various shades of life and that’s why it is drawing the attention of numerous critics and scholars. There are novels, short-stories, poems, letters, travelogues, documentations in this Indian diaspora. There is a search for roots, a search for home and a search for identity in this Indian diaspora and this amalgamates in itself various emotions, memories and curiosity. In order to understand it clearly we can have a view of Indran Basu’s interview of Gaiutra Bahadur in the Times of India (Mumbai).

Indrani Basu: Did writing this deeply-personal book affect you?

Gaiutra Bahadur; I feel like I’ve exercised many ghost writing this. People ask me if it is a Roots narrative – it is and it is n’t. I know myself better now, not because I found I village in Bihar to belong to, but because I came to understand the historical trauma indenture was.... Knowing your own history is armour – for one, writing my own history was also catharsis. (20 January 2014: 12).

There are emotions evoked by a patch of land having deep roots in the history of migration. The yearning for the ‘home’ and ‘roots’ is prominent but difficulty in negotiation is a different kind of helplessness in Indian Diasporic writers. The feeling of alienation and rootlessness is strongly felt by the immigrants on the foreign shore. Uma Parameswaran has defined it attentively, “.... the first is one of nostalgia for the homeland left behind mingled with fear in strange land. The second is a phase in which one is so busy adjusting to the new environment that there is little creative output. The third phase is the shaping of Diaspora existence by involving themselves in ethno-cultural issues. The fourth is when they have ‘arrived’ and start participating in the larger world of politics and national issues.” (TALR, Vol.1, No. 2, 165)

Some things are very common in these Indian Diasporic writers such as nostalgia and a sense of yearning for the motherlands traditions. Sometimes these writers mix their nostalgia with the criticism of the evils of Indian society, making a fun of them by making a contrast with their host countries. The Indian diaspora is enriched with the Writings of V.S. Naipaul, Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh, Jhumpa Lahiri and Shashi Tharoor. When Vikram Seth and Rohinton Mistry started living abroad, they also became more creative. As today many of them are counted as global writers without their identity as migrants as is said by Huggan, "The future of Indian literature in English in the millennium seems indisputable, the reputations of its best known writers intact, its commercial success virtually ensured. Yet it remains a cause for concern that nearly all the recognized writers are located in the Diaspora." (Huggan, 2001, 77-78)

Rohinton Mistry is a writer of Indian Diaspora. He is an Indian Writing from Canada. In popularity he can be matched with Salman Rushdie and Arundhati Roy. Mistry represents Parsi-Zoroastrians of Bombay; their immigration to India and their immigration to the West. He could do so with aptness and perfection because he himself was a Parsi Zoroastrian whose ancestors were forced into exile by the Muslims who conquered Iran. Thus in a way he was in a kind of diaspora even in India. The Parsi community was in the core of his heart as well as in the core of his fiction. Mistry highlights the struggles of the emigrants and immigrants by giving them a voice and by condemning their victimization. They have been privileged citizens in one country and disenfranchised foreigners in another.

Rohinton Mistry was in diaspora when he was in India and he is in diaspora in Canada also. He has a sense of loss and a kind of nostalgia whenever he recalls the journey of the Parsi community from Iran to India and various other places. He represents various memories of his childhood and young age in his 'In Swimming Lessons' and 'The Tales' when these zoroastrians of Bombay came there, they had a sense of superiority complex and bemoaning the city's influx of poor immigrants, they call them 'ghatis'. They feel that their Parsi presence in the city is diminished by the sheer number of immigrants. But when the same Parsis went to the United States and Canada they are called as 'Pakis' and they themselves are handled in the same manner as they treated the so-called 'ghatis' of Bombay. Here we are reminded of the lines where Smaro Kamboureli in her essay, "The Technology of Ethnicity" says about, "The ideological margins separating the literary and the political problematised the discursive site where contestation occurs and where alternate lines of action can be pursued."

'In Swimming Lessons' Rohinton is critical of those who use the words "ghati" and "Paki". Numerous Parsi characters in Swimming Lessons express displacement and sense of frustration due to herd struggle to rediscover this relevance. They blame 'ghatis' for the state of affairs. In colloquial Hindi "Ghati " refers to those Marathi speaking people who come from rural areas beyond Mumbai and they are regarded as belonging to low class. Whereas in the English-Hindi/Hindi-English Dictionary (1995) "Ghatiys" is an adjective meaning

“cheap”, of “bad quality” or inferior (84, 472). In Mistry’s work these ghatiya are people who are indistinguishable from poor Maharastrians and who are non-Marathi speaking Mumbians. It is a derogatory term similar to its American equivalent, “nigger”, though it is a localized term used in North India and Mumbai to describe large and poor majority peoples by privileged few. As say Michael Foucault, “like ethnic selfhood and identity, the notion of equality is an ‘indifference’ (of no material concern).

“Swimming Lessons” is the last story out of the set of eleven stories titled ‘Tales From Firozsha Baag’ further retitled as Swimming Lessons and Other Stories from Firozsha Baag published in 1989 in the United States. The narrator of the story moves from Bombay to Toronto alongwith its setting. It gives a glimpse of the events of the past life of the writer based on his memories. While other stories focus on the Parsi community in the Bombay housing complex called Firozsha Baag.

The present paper aims at the representation of these marginalized characters in ‘Swimming Lesson’ who suffer due to mental tortures as well as horrible physical violence. First we will talk about Jacqueline who traveled by herself from Goa to Mumbai in search of work. Her story is the story of various Mumbai’s in-immigrants. And Edward said it to be a kind of self-imposed migration. According to him it is an ascetic mode of ‘Willed Homelessness.’ Her father was a farmer having a small plot of land with eleven children to feed was nearly impossible for them to support their large family and Jacqueline had to leave home to share their burden. And coming to Mumbai, she started working as an ‘ayah’ in a Parsi family for forty-nine years.

In the housing complex of Firozsha Baag, there were other Christian maids also and Jacqueline refers to them as “all of us Catholic ayas from Firozsha Baag.’ (43) These female domestics had to suffer verbal, sexual and physical abuse in the workplace. They had to work for long working hours on a very low pay along with all types of harassment. In ‘The Ghost of Firozsha Baag’, Jacqueline is mistreated by his mistress. She is forced to sleep on the floor, called by the distorted name ‘Jaakaylie” and despite being a trusted servant, forbidden to have the keys of the apartment. Though there was a machine, her mistress made her grind masala by hand. The boys of the bag tease her for seeing a ‘bhoot’ or ghost. And in the words of Bharati Mukherjee she passes through the, “smothering tyranny of nostalgia and surmounted the temptation of ghettoization” (Mukherjee, 1992, 35)

Francis is another marginalized character in ‘Swimming Lessons’. He is the unfortunate handyman of ‘On Sunday’ who can be an in-migrant and who experiences physical and mental violence like Jacqueline. In order to save himself from starving, Francis does odd jobs for the Baags residents, though he is employed as a delivery boy by the furniture store near Firozsha Baag. He is homeless and sleeps under the “owning” of the furniture store. He is courteous and dignified and always wears a smile but the inhabitants of the society treat him with suspicion. When he was seeking Nagama to ask for work in the hallway, Tehmina encountered him. She calls Francis an ‘idiot’ (27) and ‘rascal’ for no

reason. Though he does not respond in kind but thinks for Tehmina to be 'offensive' (27) rude and bounce. Once when Francis does not have money to buy food, he steals eighty rupees from Nagama. He thinks that these eighty rupees will pay for several cheap meals. But he is caught, severely beaten and handed over to the police to be tortured

The lives of both Jacqueline and Francis reveal fate of those in-migrants who come to big cities like Mumbai with big dreams. But most of them have to work for low income jobs consequently a large part of the population of the city has to live in slums. Rohinton represents the mistreatment and alienation of these unemployed labourers by the status of Francis and Jacqueline. According to Jamshed and Percy, these type of in-migrants flood Mumbai. But these migrants are not compassionate to each other as there are hatreds and hierarchies among themselves. As when Francis runs into Tar Gully to escape, he is caught and beaten by the residents. And when he is brought back to the Baag, his close friend, the only Muslim servant of the complex, kicks him so hard that he 'yelped like a dog and keeled over'.(37) The kick is the literal expression of what the Percy and Jamshed feel for the 'ghatis'.

Rohinton Mistry's presentation of the hatred of the Parsis and their hostile relations with these immigrants takes an interesting turn when they themselves are treated like outcasts after being immigrated to North America. When these Parsis made their first appearance in the "New World" in the early twentieth century, they are mistreated in the same manner as they used to do in Mumbai. Many characters in 'Swimming Lessons' move to the West and Americans and Canadians look at these Asian immigrants as Percy and Jamshed describe in-migrants in Mumbai, as a flood. These Parsi immigrants become the western hemisphere's vision of Francis and Jacqueline. When they lived in India they harbored a sense of superiority, entitlement and distinctiveness which became meaningless in North America. White North Americans call them "Paki", a derogatory term, as they make use of the word 'Ghati' to describe Mumbai's in-migrants. Now these Indians are victims of hatred and violence in Canada and the United States.

But whatever be their condition in the West, these Indian immigrants mostly have racist attitudes whenever they visit India. These type of professionals are sure that they are superior to everything left behind in India whether it be individuals or habits. In 'The Squatter' Sarosh flies to Toronto and feels that his name is a misfit in the surroundings of Canada, he anglicised it to 'Sid'. Sarosh tries in every possible way to adopt the western civilization and feels that the Indian method of squatting over the Indian toilet is 'ignominy' (162) and 'a grotesquely abhorrent thing to do' (162). His adventures on Commode are humorous but at the same time represent his mental condition. It is his firm belief that if he cannot release his bowels by sitting on commode, he will return to India, "If he could not be westernized in all respects, he was nothing but a failure in this land' (162). He is so fascinated by American or Canadian culture that thinks it to be better than being Indian. But his failure to conquer the commode also hints that the assimilation of Indian immigrants is

next to impossible because they are different in race and religion. It is too difficult for them to adjust in a new world because, “the question of identity is always a difficult one, but specially for those who are culturally displaced as immigrants are who grow up into two worlds simultaneously.” (HMC). Sarosh feels the antagonism of others when once while using a public restroom, others in the facility notice his unconventional method of defecation and are agitated at “the foreign presence in the stall’ (156) And Sid feels ‘the presence of xenophobia and hostility. (157)

In the final story of the collection in ‘Swimming Lessons’ Kersi goes to attend an adult swimming class in Toronto. On the first day of his lesson three white Canadian boys started passing derogatory comments at Kersi: “One of them holds his nose. The second begins to hum, under his breath: Paki, Paki, smell like curry. The third says to the first two: pretty soon all the water’s going to taste of curry.” (238) Parsis living in Canada and United States have reported less incidents of discrimination than Parsis living in Toronto. These experiences are referred as ‘Paki-bashing’ (Qtd. In Hinnells 352)

Though it would be a kind of injustice to say that Parsis are the only Indians to be abused by the terms ‘ghati’ and ‘Paki’, but it is also true that Parsi identity is badly affected by the emigration in postcolonial India and immigration to the postmodern West. Though there are various factors responsible for this but one of them is surely the inhospitality of postcolonial Bombay and the unfriendly atmosphere of North America. But the status of contemporary Parsi community is totally different from that. Those who are ignorant of Parsis, they can have a distorted view of the community while reading the short stories of Kersi, who sends a manuscript of short stories from Toronto to Bombay. Kersi’s father Mr. Boyce disapproves the presentation of the complexes residents by his son and rebukes him for not giving any heed to the portraits of famous Parsis like Petits, Tatas and Naoroji and argues, what would people reading these stories think, those who did not know about Parsis that the whole community was full of cranky, bigoted people; and in reality it was the richest, most advanced and philanthropic community in India, and he did not need to tell his own son that Parsis had a reputation for being generous and family-oriented”(245). The criticism of Kersi’s short-stories by his own father is suggestive of the disapproval of the ‘Swimming Lessons’ of Rohinton Mistry by common Parsi readers. But it can be said that Kersi’s tales and Mistry’s ‘Swimming Lessons’ both represent the sober reality of middle class Parsi life. Mistry clearly depicts the feelings of frustration and alienation after being uprooted from their native lands. The stories are a precise medium to remind us that “the pair of assimilation lasts not just a generation – the children feel it as much as the parents do.” (BCL)

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