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Voicing Memory through Diaspora Consciousness: A Psychometric Assessment of Rohinton Mistry's Works

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Abstract:

Diaspora literature primarily revolves around the intellection of a homeland from where displacement ensues. It expresses and explores the tribulations and experiences of migration. Rohinton Mistry, the Indian diaspora writer gives a voice to the past bequeathed memories, oral testimonies, remembered histories and stories. In his works he depicts the reflection of the societal and contemporary life and also puts forward his observations on the historical situations and raises a national debate. This paper depicts the social, cultural and political India in the works of Rohinton Mistry. He expresses the past and also gives expression to the experiences in the alien land. The blend of nostalgia and reaction to the alien land lead to a kind of hope for change of the alien land into a new homeland.

Keywords: Diaspora, Parsi, alienation, displacement, nostalgia.

1. Introduction

Diaspora has become a key trope in the humanities in recent times. It is a phenomenon that can be traced to antiquity. Etymologically, the word 'diaspora' originated from the Greek composite verb 'diaspeirein' (where 'dia' means 'about' and 'speirein' means 'to scatter') meaning 'to scatter about', or 'disperse'. In short, the term 'diaspora' stands for communities of inhabitants displaced from their native soil through migration, immigration, or exile as a ramification of colonial expansion/imperialism/trade/business/better opportunities or prospects/globalization. The diaspora of various countries and their experiences are at variance in view of the fact that their history is different. When we talk of diaspora we begin with the Jewish context. In the past the term Diaspora referred explicitly to the population of Jews exiled from Judea in 586 B.C. by the Babylonians, and A.D. 135 by the Romans.

2. Defining diasporas

The concept of diaspora and its geographical and territorial dimensions have all been subject to various interpretations. Judith Shuval has defined diaspora in the following terms:

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A diaspora is a social construct founded on feeling, consciousness, memory, mythology, history, meaningful narratives, group identity, longings, dreams, allegorical and virtual elements all of which play an important role in establishing a diaspora reality. At a given moment in time, the sense of connection to a homeland must be strong enough to resist forgetting, assimilating or distancing (Shuval 2000, p.43).

Stuart Hall (1990) and Paul Gilroy (1994) opine the diaspora is defined not by biographical connectivity across geographical areas or political boundaries, but is created by and through differentiation. Alison Blunt, in her book *Domicile and Diaspora* writes: "the term 'diaspora' is inherently geographical, implying a scattering of people over space and transnational connections between people and places. Geography clearly lies at the heart of diaspora both as a concept and as lived experience, encompassing the contested interplay of place, home, culture and identity through migration and resettlement"(282).

Diaspora writers subsist on the fringes of two countries and shape cultural theories. The basic features of diaspora scripts are the search for identity, uprooting and re-rooting, insider and outsider syndrome, melancholy, homesickness and an excruciating sense of guilt. The diaspora authors differ not only on the theme of writing, but they also differ based on generations or ages. Based on the theme of writing, diaspora writers may be divided into two types: writers whose works focus on their home country and writers whose works talk about the settled country. The first type of writers locate their work in their home country in order to criticize it or to portray their home country and its culture to the foreign readers or use their work as a tool to remember their home country. The second type of writers locate their works in the settled countries to reflect the changes they undergo or to tear the mask of multicultural nations, by portraying its discrimination towards them, or to show their developed condition in the settled countries.

3. Migration of the Parsis

The Indian diaspora may be deemed as the biggest within the Asian diaspora as the Indian community dispersed throughout the globe is above twenty five million. The Parsis are an ethno-religious minority in India. Subsequent to the Arab conquest of Iran in the seventh century, they fled their homeland and came in huge numbers to India, seeking peace and freedom to practice their religion. The proximity of India to the southern Iranian ports and the centuries-old trade between the two countries made it a natural choice of refuge for the Iranians. First they reached Diu, a small island port in the Gulf of Cambay. After a couple of years they moved to Sanjan in South Gujarat. The area was then under the rule of liberal chief Jadi Rana who provided them asylum. A famous anecdote about the Parsis' arrival in India became a founding legend. As the story went, when the Parsis reached Gujarat, the region's ruler resisted their presence and sent them a diplomat holding a symbolic message, that is, a glass of milk filled to the brim, suggesting that the container could hold no more. The Parsis then sent the monarch back his full glass of milk in which a spoonful of sugar had been added, communicating their intention to

intermingle with the native population as sugar does with milk. This symbolic gesture meant that the Zoroastrians would mingle with the local population without disturbing them - rather the Zoroastrians would sweeten their lives. The ruler was pleasantly amazed by this gesture and welcomed them. The Parsis shifted to Bombay from rural Gujarat during the British rule in India, as this city provided them with opportunities for all round development of the community.

4. Mistry - his experience of double displacement

Diasporic community of any country makes its presence felt in the host land through its contribution in politics, literature, cinema and other forms of art. The Parsis have contributed to different aspects of Indian life and culture. A recent development in Parsi literature has been a number of novels in English. They are introducing their motherland to the people of their host land with their stories and thus acting as mediators or translators of culture and language of both the countries. Rohinton Mistry is a Parsi Zoroastrian, born in the year 1952, in Bombay, and immigrated to Canada in 1975. Mistry gained immense recognition as a literary figure with the publication of the three novels - *Such a Long Journey* (1991), *A Fine Balance* (1995) and *Family Matters* (2002). He has authored a collection of short stories too entitled *Tales from Firozsha Baag* (1987) and his latest book is a story *The Scream* (2008). Like other Parsi writers, he is fervent to upkeep the ethnic identity of his community for which he finds literature as one of the most appropriate as well as effectual media. Rohinton Mistry portrays the Indian socio-economic and political life as well as Parsi Zoroastrian life, customs and beliefs in his works. Nilufer E. Bharucha reports with reference to his diaspora status thus:

As an Indian who now lives in and writes from Canada, Rohinton Mistry is a writer of the Indian Diaspora. However Mistry is also a Parsi Zoroastrian and as a person whose ancestors were forced into exile by the Islamic conquest of Iran, he was in Diaspora even in India. Like other Parsi writers, his writing is informed by this experience of double displacement (Bharucha 1998, p.23).

When diasporic people find themselves dislocated from the home society, they are mentally upset and strive to remember and locate themselves in a nostalgic past. Through nostalgia they try to escape from the reality of life in the settled land.

Tales from Firozsha Baag is Mistry's first compilation of eleven interrelated short stories detailing the lives of a group of Parsi tenants living in a Bombay (now Mumbai) apartment building called Firozsha Baag. Mistry captures both the vanishing certainties of the Parsi community diasporised in India and the ambivalent lives of the Parsi individual diasporised in America and Canada. In 'The Exercisers', the youthful protagonist disobeys his parents and their spiritual mentor by dating a lady who does not belong to the Parsi community. Daulat of 'Condolence Visit' upsets her neighbours by renouncing from religious custom and declining to mourn her husband as per the Parsi rituals. The story 'Lend Me Your Light' acquaints us in an exceptionally cynical way, the instance of physically crossing the ocean and beginning a fresh

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life in Canada, when the young immigrant's burden of 'riddles and puzzles' about life in India is still unanswered. The conflicting visions in the narrator's mind are articulated through the figure of Tiresias borrowed from Eliot's *The Wasteland*:

"I saw myself as someone out of a Greek tragedy, guilty of the sin of hubris seeking emigration out of the land of my birth, and paying the price in burnt-out eyes: I, Tiresias, blind and throbbing between two lives, the one in Bombay and the other one to come in Toronto"(Mistry 217).

In 'Swimming Lessons' the setting moves along with the character from Bombay to Toronto and the writer draws deft parallels between the lives of the residents of apartment complexes in both of these crowded, multicultural urban settings. The protagonist expresses a great anxiety about the bathing suit not being able to contain his body:

"I wonder how everything will stay in place, not that I'm boastful about my endowments. I try them on, and feel that the tip of my member lingers perilously close to the exit. Too close, in fact, to conceal..." (Mistry, *Tales from Firozsha Baag* 235).

He is concerned that his Parsi identity cannot be contained within a Canadian identity.

Such a Long Journey was shortlisted for the Booker Prize, won the Canada's Governor General Award, the W.H. Smith/Books in Canada First Novel Award, and the Commonwealth Writer's Prize for Best Book. It is a significant contribution to the corpus of Parsi fiction in English. Mistry re-creates the sociopolitical situation of the 1970s in India. It is the story of Gustad Noble, a man who puts up a brave fight against a largely hostile society as he gets entangled in a series of complications and finds himself implicated in several crimes during the Bangladesh War of the 1970s. It is said that Mistry derived the title from Eliot's poem "The Journey of the Magi". A sense of dejection is also implied in the title:

The eponymous phrase "*Such a Long Journey*" is evocative of the protagonist Gustad Noble's strife throughout the course of the novel against myriad forces of poverty, political exigency, recurrent governmental influx into public life, and his struggle to sustain some semblance of equilibrium in his family life within these plural gravities.

(<https://csbhagya.wordpress.com/2012/06/02/such-a-long-journey/>)

Dinshawji says to Gustad with relation to Indira Gandhi's bold decision to nationalize the banks:

What days those were, yaar. What fun we used to have...Parsis were the king of banking in those days. Such respect we used to get. Now the whole atmosphere only has been spoiled. Ever since that Indira nationalized the banks (*Such a Long Journey* 38).

In *Such a Long Journey*, Bombay is portrayed to be agitated by the rise of Shiv Sena (a local party) and the characters consider it as a real threat. Dinshawji panics that the Parsis may turn out to be second class citizens in the near future. Gustad Noble reflects on the community's precarious status:

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"No future for minorities, with all these fascist Shiv Sena politics and Marathi language sense" (10).

The unanticipated departure of Major Jimmy Bilimoria from Khodadad building astounds Gustad as he considers Major Bilimoria as his friend and philosopher. Like a typical Parsi, he comments upon his friend's manners saying: "To leave like this, after being neighbours for so many years, is a shameful way of behaving. Bloody bad manners"(14). Gustad is also upset by Shorab's (his son) strange behaviour. He is extremely disturbed when Shorab declines to register himself as an IIT student shattering his dreams of a prosperous future for his son.

Such a Long Journey represents the minority community holding on to its historical past and ethical value system in a land under turmoil because of war, corruption and majoritarian politics. Mistry's writings are markedly nostalgic. Through Gustad's mind and memories of past and present, the novel is able to recreate history. The central motif of journey sets the tone of the novel right from the beginning. It is a recurrent theme in immigrant diasporic writing. Gustad comes to a final realisation that life is a rather extensive journey which has to be faced with love and patience: "So much gravel to tread, so many walks to take" (254).

A Fine Balance was shortlisted for the Booker Prize. It achieved the Giller Prize, the Royal Society of Literature's Winfried Holtby Prize, the 1996 Los Angeles Times Award for fiction and was turned into a film by the same title in 1998. The backdrop of the story is India during the mid seventies, the time when Indira Gandhi had proclaimed a state of internal emergency without consulting her cabinet. The novel charts the lives of four characters tragically intertwined by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's ill-conceived policies. Mistry, like other writers of the Parsi community, is hypersensitive to the angst felt by his group of people. He demonstrates this by responding to the existing threats to the Parsi family and community solely, and also to the country on the whole.

"Forced vasectomy, detention without trial, limitations of freedom of speech, media censorship, ambiguous family planning clinics are among the consequences of Emergency experienced by Mistry's protagonists" (Pier 281).

We get a knowledge of the historical perspective - Civil Disobedience Movement, communal riots, Partition - through the recollections of Dina Dalal. The identity crisis of Dina Dalal who has to go through hard times when her husband passes away in an accident, and is forced to obey her brother Nuswan's strict and abusive rules is really disturbing. She resolves to restructure her life without being economically dependent on a man.

Mistry's works are markedly nostalgic. The memories are evoked due to past times and occurrences, people and place as they were when the writer experienced them. Nostalgia (developed from the Greek term '*nostos*', implying 'return home', and '*algia*' referring to 'pain' or 'longing', denoting a feeling of yearning for a home distanced by time or space) has always been

a supportive device for Mistry to create an alternative historical reality fashioned by the images of the golden past, particularly when there is dissatisfaction with the present socio-economic situation in a culture. As Svetlana Boym explains in *The Future of Nostalgia*: "Nostalgia is a sentiment of loss and displacement, but is also a romance with one's own fantasy." *Family Matters* is the story of feuding step-siblings trying to shift onto each other the responsibility of caring for their dying father. The story revolves around Nariman Vakeel. A retired teacher of English, a widower with Parkinson's disease, he resides with Jal and Coomy (his step-children). *Family Matters* has references to the animosity between Hindus and Muslims post Babri Masjid episode. Reference are made to the lawlessness and the collapse of the legal system:

"The goondas who assumed Muslims were hiding in Dalal Estate and set fire to it?" (*Family Matters* 4)

"Some things can't be ignored. Maybe Jal is right, Bombay is an uncivilised jungle now". (*Family Matters* 45)

In this novel Mistry hints at the corruption that prevails in India, through Yezad: "Corruption is in the air we breathe. This nation specializes in turning honest people into crooks"(30). The fiction in fact is the depiction of the squalor of moral and ethical values in diverse circles of cosmopolitan societal life with its increasing materialism, greed, corruption and despicable politics. The identity crisis or crisis of being is the malaise of the present age. The advancement of technology and the growth of communication, the changing family and corporate structures have largely disturbed relations in myriad ways and finally left the people vulnerable. The identity crisis is closely linked to the loss of and search for one's individuality.

5. Conclusion

There is a significant difference between the term 'diaspora' of the third century B.C. and that of the twenty-first century. The term has been metamorphosed into a concept, a theory. In the earlier centuries, diasporas denoted only a dislodgment from the geographical position of origin and relocation in one or more province or country. In the present century, diaspora signifies not only relocation of people but also repositioning of culture, replacement as well as displacement of sensibility. Contemporary diaspora writing unites the past and the present and designs innovative perceptions of fluid and transnational identities; it opens up spaces for novel expressions of a transnational global culture. Through his diasporic discourse, Rohinton Mistry has given a picture of his ancestral background, his community's encaged conditions in Bombay metropolis and his profound connections with his homeland, as well as melancholy and remorse for a world gone by. All his short stories and novels showcase Mistry's concern with bearing witness to a dying community and humanity. As a diaspora writer he gives a voice to the past bequeathed memories, oral testimonies, remembered histories and stories.

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