

## Mapping Narrative Space and Memory in Rohinton Mistry's "Swimming Lessons"

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### **Abstract:**

This paper examines the function of narrative space and memory in Rohinton Mistry's short story "Swimming Lessons," the concluding story of *Tales from Firozsha Baag*. It argues that Mistry constructs a dynamic spatial framework in which physical geography of Bombay and Toronto is interwoven with psychological and mnemonic landscapes. Through a continuous oscillation between past and present, the narrative maps memory as an alternative space that both preserves cultural identity and negotiates immigrant dislocation.

The paper explores three interrelated dimensions: the movement of memory as a narrative strategy, the representation of dual cultural spaces embedded within the diasporic experience, and the symbolic use of water imagery as a metaphor for transition, alienation, and self-discovery. By juxtaposing Kersi's recollections of Parsi life in Bombay with his encounters in multicultural Toronto, Mistry creates a dialectical relationship between belonging and estrangement. The study further examines how desire, nostalgia, and generational anxiety operate within this spatial framework, revealing the tensions between assimilation and cultural continuity. Ultimately, the paper demonstrates that in "Swimming Lessons," narrative itself becomes a cartographic act, mapping the immigrant consciousness and preserving the "important difference" that defines diasporic identity.

**Keywords:** Narrative Space; Memory; Diaspora; Immigrant Identity; Cultural Hybridity.

Narrative space plays a pivotal role in shaping identity and memory in the arena of Indian English Literature. It includes the shaping of stories and characters, as well as fictional and real spaces, through a web of narrative patterns. In this context, this paper reflects on the role played by narrative space through a rereading of Rohinton Mistry's short story "Swimming Lessons." Firstly, it examines the concept of a "travel through memory" and explores how memory functions as a significant component of narrative. Secondly, it discusses the hidden dual cultural spaces that remain metaphorically dormant within the narrative. Finally, the paper analyses Mistry's narrative endeavour to map Parsi cultural space and the painful recollections of the immigrant experience.

Rohinton Mistry (1952) is an Indian-born Canadian writer who occupies a significant position as an Indian diasporic writer, alongside figures such as Salman Rushdie, V. S. Naipaul, and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. Mistry became a successful writer because of the challenges he took up within his community, as art or writing becomes a way to come to terms with these challenges. Mistry himself belongs to a minority community in India, the Parsis, and he has lived through many complex variants of Parsi culture and history. He draws his major source of material from his situation as a younger-generation Parsi in India and from related issues concerning Parsi background, cultural identity, and the political atmosphere. Thus, his works explore the stark, poignant, and often humorous lives of Indian Parsis, who are the descendants of Persian Zoroastrians.

Mistry's first crucial work, *Tales from Firozsha Baag* (1987), is a collection of eleven short stories that brought him national attention in Canada and subsequently in the United States. In the first ten stories, Mistry concentrates on the complex patterns of life inside Firozsha Baag, a Parsi-dominated apartment complex in Mumbai, presented through both insider and outsider perspectives. Though his works are enriched with symbols, powerful images, and appropriate

metaphors, he rarely narrates a story that is disconnected. "Swimming Lessons," the final story in the collection, shifts the focus to issues of loneliness and cultural acclimation experienced by Mistry's Indian immigrant protagonist, Kersi. In this delightful story, Kersi's mother and father discuss their son's failure to mention his new life in Canada, as he remains preoccupied with the world he has left behind. His mind travels from Toronto to Bombay, exploring the fundamental identity of the Parsi community.

### **Travel through Memory**

Beena Kamlani, in her article "Lend Me Your Light: Rohinton Mistry and the Art of Storytelling," sums up the profundity of Mistry's work with the words of the poet Louise Glück: "We look at the world once, in childhood; the rest is memory" (Kamlani 54). The richness of his Parsi life lies in the memories of Mistry.

"Swimming Lessons" is narrated from the author's viewpoint, devoid of italicized portions, that use the third person to depict Kersi's parents' responses to the mail he sends from Toronto. These are set in his parents' home, Firozsha Baag, the Parsi apartment in Bombay. They read his letters, which are the raw manuscript of stories, and discuss their son and his work. Simultaneously, the story takes place in an apartment complex in the Don Mills suburb of Toronto, its elevator lobby, its parking lot, and the local high school pool where the protagonist ventures to take his swimming lessons.

In the opening scene, the narrator, whose name is never mentioned in the story, is the same Parsi Indian character named Kersi, describes "the old man" in the wheelchair. He waits for people in the apartment lobby to make small conversation. The narrator then introduces the Portuguese woman in Toronto, the communicator for the apartment building, making the first italicized jump-shift to Bombay. He begins to reveal things about himself and his parents. His parents are the only

major characters and are presented with complexity, both as individuals and as a couple who lived together for many years. At first, the father did not answer Kersi's letters because he dislikes Mistry's short and impersonal tone. The following lines of the text reiterate the lines of the text: "Father looked up from the newspaper and said, don't get too excited, first read it, you know what kind of letters he writes, a few lines of empty words, I'm fine, hope you are all right, your loving son—that kind of writing I don't call letter-writing" (230).

Again, the story moves to Toronto, where he describes two women sunbathing in bikinis beside the parking lot and his attempts to get a closer look. When they turn out to be less attractive, he remembers the swimming lessons he has registered for. He recounts a conversation with the attendant at the pool registration desk:

I was curious because an Indian couple, husband and wife, also registered a few minutes ago. Is swimming not encouraged in India?" "On the contrary," I say. "Most Indians swim like fish. I'm an exception to the rule. My house was five minutes' walking distance from Chaupatty Beach in Bombay. ... I never learned to swim." (232)

Subsequently, there is a long passage of memory based on incidences of swimming, water, and religious festivals relating to water in the narrator's life before immigrating to Canada. "Water imagery in my life is recurring," (233) says the narrator as he contemplates Chaupatty Beach in Bombay in his childhood and the pool where his swimming lessons occur in Toronto. Usually, water and filth are mutually exclusive symbols, but in this story they blend, both in the narrator's present reality and his memory. This is followed by another shift to India, where the narrator's parents converse about their son in Canada as they write to him. Sudha Bhuchar, a playwright,

says, "I hugely admire Mistry and see him as a master storyteller who manages to draw intensely human portraits of characters, immersed in a gigantic social landscape" (Bhuchar 55).

Interestingly, the story's setting moves with the narrator back and forth between Bombay and Toronto. It allows Mistry to draw parallel spaces between the lives of the residents of the apartment in multicultural urban settings and in Toronto. It also gives us an opportunity to explore the magnificence of the writer's 'memory,' which keeps migrating in the narrative. The narrative world extends beyond the spatial-time construction, even though it cannot fill out these geographical spaces. Mistry tries to juxtapose his world of wit, depth, and understanding of life with his narrative through 'memory.' This coincides with Sudha Bhuchar, who also sums up the central concern of the émigré writer through the rhetorical wordplay: "Do you remember because you are a writer, or do you write because you remember?" (Bhuchar 56).

### **Theoretical Perspectives on Diasporic Space and the Symbolism of Water**

The oscillation between Bombay and Toronto in Rohinton Mistry's "Swimming Lessons" may also be understood through the theoretical lens of diasporic spatiality. Diaspora does not merely signify geographical displacement; it involves the psychological negotiation of identity in a space that is neither entirely home nor fully foreign. Kersi inhabits what may be termed an in-between or liminal space, where memory and present reality coexist in tension. His identity is not rooted exclusively in Bombay nor securely established in Toronto; rather, it emerges in the shifting terrain between these two cultural coordinates. In this sense, narrative space in the story functions as a "third" "experiential realm constructed through recollection, imagination, and writing, where Kersi reconciles the fractures of migration.

Memory, therefore, becomes an alternative geography. It resists the erasure that often accompanies assimilation and preserves what his father calls the "important difference." The

manuscript Kersi sends home symbolizes this hybrid space of articulation. Though physically located in Canada, his creative consciousness remains deeply entangled with the textures, sounds, and rhythms of Parsi life in Bombay. The narrative thus demonstrates that immigrant identity is not formed by abandoning the past but by continuously rewriting it within a new spatial framework. This interstitial condition produces both anxiety and creative energy, shaping the story's structure through its constant movement across continents.

The symbolism of water further intensifies this spatial negotiation. Water recurs as a central motif linking Kersi's childhood memories of Bombay to his present experiences in Toronto. Traditionally associated with purification, rebirth, and transition, water in "Swimming Lessons" acquires layered meanings. The Arabian Sea at Chaupatty Beach evokes organic belonging and childhood intimacy. It represents a natural, open, and culturally embedded space. In contrast, the swimming pool in Toronto is an enclosed, regulated, and artificial environment, governed by rules and discipline. The sea suggests fluid cultural continuity, whereas the pool reflects the structured demands of assimilation in the West.

Kersi's inability to swim becomes symbolically significant within this framework. Although raised near the sea, he never learned to swim; similarly, despite living in Canada, he struggles to immerse himself confidently in its cultural waters. His fear at the deep end of the pool parallels his uncertainty about entering the depths of a new society. Water thus becomes a metaphor for transition that remains incomplete. It offers the possibility of transformation, yet it simultaneously exposes vulnerability. Even his erotic fantasies at the pool dissolve into disappointment, suggesting that the anticipated freedoms of Western space do not fully resolve his inner dislocation.

Furthermore, the blending of water and filth in his memories complicates conventional symbolic associations. Bombay's sea is not romanticized; it is described alongside images of pollution and crowding. Yet this imperfect space remains emotionally resonant. By juxtaposing the impure yet familiar waters of Bombay with the sanitized but alien pool in Toronto, Mistry underscores the paradox of migration: the homeland may be flawed, but it is affectively sustaining, while the adopted land may be materially advanced, yet emotionally estranging.

Through this intricate use of water imagery, Mistry transforms physical space into psychological metaphor. The act of learning to swim becomes emblematic of learning to inhabit diaspora, an effort marked by hesitation, longing, and gradual self-awareness. In doing so, the narrative maps not merely two cities, but the fluid and unstable terrain of immigrant consciousness itself.

### **Alternative Narrative as a Cultural Outlet**

In India, the role and status of the woman illuminate literature with their value and vividness. Indian English writers have discussed the plights and issues of women in a male-dominated society. Unfortunately, the writers are neither allowed to express their sexually excited feelings nor to describe the features of the woman's body. Mistry is extensively exposed to major modern Western literary trends such as Postmodernism and various narrative techniques. It forces Mistry to give his narrative a fresh orientation. The narrator is privileged to have socio-cultural freedom in Toronto, which is restricted in India. The story "Swimming Lessons" makes many suggestive sexual references that Kersi is a shy and sexually repressed individual. He is candid about his erotic urges and the fact that he has the freedom in Toronto to look at women as long as he wants, and he spies on his neighbours sunbathing in their bikinis. One of them undoes her straps as she tans, and Kersi is eager for more. The sunbathers are minor figures who serve primarily to reflect the narrator's thoughts and feelings. First seen from a distance, they are his objects of desire:

The sun is hot today. ... they're both luscious and gleaming. From time to time, they smear lotion over their skin, on their bellies, on the inside of their thighs, on their shoulders. Then one of them gets the other to undo the string of her top and spread some there. She lies on her stomach with the straps undone. I wait. I pray that the heat and haze make her forget, when it's time to turn over, that the straps are undone. (231)

But when the narrator chances to look at them closely inside the elevator, he is disappointed: "Under the fluorescent glare in the elevator, I see their wrinkled skin, aging hands, sagging bottoms, varicose veins. The lustrous trick of sun and lotion and distance has ended" (232). Ironically, the readers can notice his disappointment and shift in the perception of the sunbathers. He also discusses his newly purchased swimming trunks and recounts a sexual fantasy about them that indicates his high hopes for an erotic encounter at the upcoming swimming lessons.

I try them on, and feel that the tip of my member lingers perilously close to the exit. ... a gorgeous woman in the class for non-swimmers, at whose sight I will be instantly aroused, and she, spying the shape of my desire, will look me straight in the eye with her intentions; she will come home with me, to taste the pleasures of my delectable Asian brown body, whose strangeness has intrigued her and unleashed uncontrollable surges of passion inside her throughout the duration of the swimming lesson. (234–235)

Unfortunately, his sexual fantasies materialize only in his imagination. He describes his excitement when a woman in the group demonstrates floating face up, and he watches her pubic hair wafting in the water around the edges of her swimsuit. However, he is terrified when he is asked to paddle to the deep end. During his second swimming lesson, he is utterly disappointed to notice that the

floating woman has shaved her pubic area and no longer reveals anything that stimulates his erotic imagination. He eventually quits his swimming classes, as they no longer provide him with pleasure. This bodily and erotic awareness must also be read as a spatial experience, where Toronto offers a new corporeal freedom unavailable in Bombay.

### **Revisiting Nostalgia**

The unnamed old man in the opening scene plays a favourite conversational game, asking people to guess his age. Kersi, the narrator, is reminded of his own grandfather, who had Parkinson's disease and used to sit on the veranda of their complex, waving at anyone who passed by. The narrator's parents do not have enough money to afford a private nursing home, so the grandfather is admitted to Parsi General Hospital. The narrator visits his grandfather in the male ward only once, and that too on his mother's insistence. She often tells him that "the blessings of an old person were the most valuable and potent of all; they would last my whole life long" (229).

Kersi dislikes the nauseating smell in the ward and does not visit his grandfather often. Now in Toronto, he is reminded of his grandfather and laments not having spent more time with him. This guilty feeling resurfaces when he sees the old man in Toronto, and it is reflected in his narration. He says:

"But I should have gone to see him more often. Whenever Grandpa went out, while he still could in the days before parkinsonism, he would bring back pink and white sugar-coated almonds for Percy and me. Every time I remember..."

"Grandpa, I remember that; and then I think: I should have gone to see him more often." (230)

Here, narrative plays a crucial role in alleviating the narrator's sense of guilt. By articulating his regret, he attempts to reconcile with his failure to visit his grandfather frequently in the General Hospital. Thus, the past and the present coexist simultaneously in the narrative space, where

memory functions as a painful yet necessary recollection of cherished moments in Bombay. The act of narration becomes a means of emotional negotiation, allowing the narrator to process loss, distance, and remorse.

Kersi is progressively becoming “westernized” and appears to enjoy his new socio-cultural environment. He is a keen observer of the people in his apartment complex and gradually begins to write about them, as evidenced by the manuscript he sends to his parents in Bombay. Although physically located in Toronto, he continues to inhabit an interior world shaped by memories of Bombay, constantly comparing his past life with his present circumstances. When his father receives the manuscript, he shows keen interest and writes back with suggestions regarding his writing and choice of subject matter. However, he also anticipates a possible danger in Kersi’s literary trajectory:

...he will become popular because I am sure they are interested there in reading about life through the eyes of an immigrant; it provides a different viewpoint. The only danger is if he changes and becomes so much like them that he will write like one of them and lose the important difference. (248)

Mistry’s writing foregrounds this “important difference,” which makes his work distinctive and original. His narrative strategy positions space as a quintessential element, transforming geography into a dynamic site of identity formation. Through the insider/outsider perspective of the immigrant, Mistry constructs a dialectical relationship between two distant worlds Bombay and Toronto, allowing them to coexist within a single narrative framework.

Mistry’s unique narrative method may be aptly summarized in the words of Beena Kamlani, whose insight captures the subtle negotiation of memory, displacement, and cultural duality that defines his fiction.

I first read Rohinton Mistry in 1989, when *Swimming Lessons* first came out. It shocked and delighted me. These people were people I had known and grown up with in Bombay; these places were my places; these sights and sounds the soundtrack that played in my own head. I had never met such people in fiction before. How was it possible that now that world—a world I had come to see as lost, or at least gone from me—was here now, mine to savor, to remember, and to treasure? (Kamlani 53)

In “Swimming Lessons,” Rohinton Mistry transforms narrative into a cartographic act that maps not merely physical locations but the shifting terrain of immigrant consciousness. The story demonstrates that space in diaspora is never singular or stable; it is layered, remembered, imagined, and continually rewritten. Bombay and Toronto function not simply as geographical markers but as symbolic coordinates between which identity is constantly negotiated. Through the oscillation between past and present, Mistry reveals that memory itself becomes an alternative homeland, one that resists cultural erasure while simultaneously adapting to new realities.

The recurring motif of water intensifies this spatial metaphor. Kersi’s inability to swim parallels his hesitation to immerse himself fully in the unfamiliar currents of Canadian life. The sea of Bombay, though imperfect and impure, represents affective belonging, whereas the regulated swimming pool of Toronto signifies structured assimilation. In this contrast, Mistry subtly articulates the paradox of migration: material advancement does not guarantee emotional rootedness. The immigrant inhabits an in-between space, neither wholly severed from the past nor entirely anchored in the present.

Furthermore, the father’s concern about preserving the “important difference” underscores the generational anxiety embedded within diasporic existence. Writing becomes an act of

preservation and negotiation, ensuring that cultural memory is not diluted in the process of adaptation. Through storytelling, the immigrant subject reclaims authority over representation, resisting complete absorption into the dominant culture.

Specificity survives even within multicultural modernity. Through narrative, Kersi reconciles guilt, desire, nostalgia, and displacement, transforming personal memory into collective cultural testimony.

Ultimately, “Swimming Lessons” suggests that belonging is not determined solely by geography but by the stories one carries, preserves, and recreates. Rohinton Mistry affirms that immigrant identity is forged through the fluid interplay between memory and space, absence and presence, loss and reinvention. In mapping this shifting terrain, Mistry not only chronicles the Parsi diasporic experience but also illuminates the broader condition of migration, wherein identity like water remains in constant motion while retaining its depth and continuity.

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