

Memory, Desire and Alienation: Diaspora Issues in Rohinton Mistry's "Swimming Lessons"

Joy Mukherjee

Assistant Professor of English, Dinhata College, (Affiliated to Cooch Behar Panchanan Barma University), P.O. Dinhata, Dist. Cooch Behar, West Bengal, India

Abstract— *Diaspora authors are disparate, but project some common themes in their works. In delineating the realities of diaspora people they use their first hand knowledge of migration and relocation. The diaspora people are constantly shaken by two opposite pulls—that of the past coming from the nostalgic yearning for the lost homeland and that of the present born out of the newly adopted life. In fact, they live an in-between life, constantly subverting their national identity by hybridity and hyphenated identity. Among the diaspora authors from Indian Parsi background, Rohinton Mistry has adequately dealt with the various realities of migration. Even amid the upheavals of migrations, Mistry has been sharply recalling his city of birth and youth and has provided a fine blend of fiction and autobiography through recreating his lifelike situations in his fiction. His first commendable work of fiction, Tales from Firozshh Baag (1987), is spread with such examples, though he has refuted to have any deliberate intention at adding autobiographical elements to his fiction. "Swimming Lessons", an important story in that collection, well exhibits his employment of autobiographical elements through the means of memory. The present paper seeks to explore the author's engagement in the diaspora issues, especially the tendency to indulge in memory of the native land, within the short span of this very story.*

Keywords— *diaspora, migration, memory, nostalgia, recollection, desire.*

I. INTRODUCTION

The wide circulation of the term Diaspora is definitely a result of globalization and a gift of modern transportation development, but its history can be traced back to ancient Greece which served as the spawning ground for the term in its modern form. The Old Testament uses the term 'Diaspora' to indicate the dispersion of the Jews out of Palestine and clearly adds a pejorative sense to it as such dislocation from the mother land is considered to be a punishment for some sin. The term also recurs in the New Testament (John 7:35; James 1:1; 1 Peter 1:1) but the sense remains the same here also. While the term has widened in

meaning to embrace any religious or racial minority living within the territory of another religious or political society, the original sense of the Jews diaspora is still pertinent today. While the term always carries a sense of dislocation and uprooting, there is always the sense of yearning for the past which is irrevocably lost to the individual with his/her leaving the native land. Therefore, the diaspora is an existence that is constantly shaken by two opposite pulls—that of the past coming from the nostalgic yearning for the lost homeland and the present one born out of the newly adopted life. In fact, the diaspora people live an in-between life, constantly subverting their national identity by hybridity and hyphenated identity. They are seen to personify a mediated tension: "the experiences of separation and entanglement, of living here and remembering/desiring another place." (Clifford, Aug, 1994). Through their simultaneous affiliation to more than one nation and more than one culture, these diasporic people form, what Rouse has termed, "Transnational migrant circuits" (Rouse, 1991). Out of the intense desire to keep up their affinity with the native culture amidst the constant fear of being estranged from it due to the pressure of foreign culture(s), the diaspora people desperately clutch the remnants of the past existence by various means—observation of native religious and cultural practices, re-creation of the native living atmosphere and lifestyle, use of the native language in speaking with each other and, most importantly, constant revisiting the past in memory. Memory functions as a bridge to join the gulf between the past and the present lives of the diaspora communities. They are continuously engaged in a process of building up, what Salman Rushdie terms, "Imaginary Homelands". The diaspora authors are seen to be practising this in their writings as is finely summed up by Rushdie in the following way:

"It may be that writers in my position, exiles or emigrants or expatriates, are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back, even at the risk of being mutated into pillars of salt. But if we do look back we must do so in the knowledge – which gives rise to profound uncertainties – that our physical alienation from

India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely that thing that was lost, that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind” (Rushdie, 1991, p. 10).

Diaspora authors of Indian origin have undertaken meticulous care in their portrayal of this sense of double living in the space of the present and that of the past back home.

II. ARGUMENTS AND FINDINGS

In the works of the Parsi authors from India like, Bapsi Sidhwa, Farrukh Dhondy, Rohinton Mistry, Firdaus Kanga, Dina Mehta and Boman Desai, the paradoxical relationship with the native nation has come up frequently. The experience of migration and dislocation is nothing new for the Parsi communities in India as they are descendents of the Parsians who came to India from the ancient Persia after the Arab conquest of Iran in the medieval times. According to a 16th century Parsi epic, *Qissa-i Sanjan*, Zoroastrian Persians continued to migrate to the Indian subcontinent from Greater Iran in between the 8th and 10th centuries, and ultimately settled in present-day Gujarat after being granted refuge by a local Hindu king (Hodivala, 1920, p. 88). The modern migration of some of these people is like a new episode added to their already internalized inheritance of dislocation. Rohinton Mistry’s fiction at times is directed towards the revelation of the realities of diaspora existence. His birth in the then Bombay and later migration to Canada has given him a double vision with which he can see through the façade of both native and abroad lives and discover the realities covered underneath. Bombay has served his primary source of writing materials and here he seems to follow the advice given by his brother Cyrus Mistry, a playwright and short-story writer, that “Bombay is as viable a city for fiction”. Therefore, from his new abode Canada he frequents Bombay in memory and blends the realities of the two countries in a fascinating manner. One of the best chroniclers of the city, he has added an autobiographical flavour to his writing by his concentration on Bombay. He has himself admitted: “Writers write best about what they know...In the broad sense, as a processing of everything one hears or witnesses, all fiction is autobiographical—imagination ground through the mill of memory. It’s impossible to separate the two ingredients” (Morey, 2004, p. 4). Even amid the upheavals of migrations, Mistry has been sharply recalling his city of birth and youth and has provided a fine blend of fiction and autobiography by creating his lifelike situations in his fiction. His first commendable work of fiction, *Tales from Firozshh Baaq*

(1987), is spread with such examples, though he himself has refuted any deliberate effort at adding autobiographical elements to his fiction. “Swimming Lessons”, an important story in that collection, well exhibits his employment of autobiographical elements through the means of memory.

Just as the term ‘diaspora’ includes a rich stock of diversity, fluidity, changeability and heterogeneity within the past and present situations of the migrants, the use of memory in diaspora literature is likewise widely varied: sometimes evoking traumas of living amid adverse situations, and at others, taking one back into an idyllic life lived in a beautiful past. Examples of the first type can be found in hundreds of literary works centring round the partition of India and Pakistan in 1947 and the further partition of the latter country to beget Bangladesh in 1971. In the case of the thousands of Bengalis and Sikhs forced to leave their native land and to cross the border and settle in a new abode, the forcible deracination left an indelible mark on their histories and identities. For these relocated people, memory may often be a soothing balm that covers up the scar of racial violence and widespread bloodshed. Memory serves both as a healing agent for the tortured psyche of the victims and also as a constant reminder of the deprivation, the inadequacy and the alienation of this new living. Though the background of migration is different for the thousands of people willingly leaving their countries and embracing a foreign life in the last and the present centuries in search of a better life, the role of memory is also a bitter-sweet experience reminding them of the pangs of separation from the native land and simultaneously giving them a sense of satisfaction for the better life their migration has given access to them. Regarding the nature of recollection in diaspora life, it is relevant to quote Ippolito and Halbwachs: “[w]e remember not only things that have happened to us personally, but also, and perhaps more importantly, we remember events, language, attitudes, actions and values that are aspects of our membership in a group” (Ippolito, 1998) As a representative of the second category of diaspora community, Rohinton Mistry is a dedicated portrayer of the role of memory in the life of diaspora people.

Rohinton Mistry’s perspective of his native country as reflected in his memory, however, demands special attention as his vision is not merely nostalgic but also prone to highlight the faults in the life back in India. His “Swimming Lessons” adequately bears out this attitude. The action of the story centres round the life of the young narrator who has migrated to Canada lately and is in the effort of adjusting to this new life. He understands that as per the demand of the situation, he needs to learn a number of things in Canada, swimming being one of them. His predicament may be compared to that of Mrs. Sen, the eponymous protagonist in one of Jhumpa Lahiri’s short

stories from *Interpreter of Maladies*, who was necessitated to learn driving on settling in America. The narrative switches between the cold north and the hot tropic as the reactions of the narrator's parents back in India on receipt of communications from him have been presented in italics alongside the description of the narrator's desperate efforts to adapt himself to his new life. While the narrator remains engrossed in his disastrous swimming lessons, sexual fantasies and encounters with his neighbours, his yearning for the native country is expressed in the constant looking back at the imagined condition of the parents at being informed of the budding writing skill of the son in Canada. Through the parents' reading of the stories that the readers are actually reading, Mistry breaks the concept of the fourth wall and achieves the effect of what Andre Gide has termed 'mise en abîme' in the narrative (Morey, 2004). The characteristic clearly bears out the autobiographical nature of the story.

A large part of the narrative set in Canada is in the form of retrospection, thereby establishing that the pull of the native country is ever present in the protagonist, however disappointing it may appear to him. Actually, a diaspora writer enjoys a vantage point from which he can critique the defects and shortcomings of the native country, especially when the migration is from a developing country like India to any of the developed western countries. Mistry's concern in the story lies in highlighting not only the salient qualities in the lifestyle of the Parsi community in India, but also to show the squalor, the defects and also the pettiness of their lifestyle. Through his constant turning back to his homeland he is actually trying to re-create his homeland which is considered to be one of the preoccupations of the immigrant writer and is interpreted as an act of reparation for those immigrants who are tormented by a sense of guilt for having abandoned their homeland. Though Mistry never explicitly expresses his desire of returning to his native country, but in contrast constantly driven to find faults with it, his desire is dumped under the debris of his memories. Simply, the adversities his narrator faces in the alien country, forces him to resort to his memories of his former abode and make a collage out of it. Mistry, therefore, stands apart in the group of diaspora authors who seem to be haunted with the desire to return and proves true the opinion of scholars like S. Hall:

"Diaspora does not refer us to those scattered tribes whose identity can only be secured in relation to some sacred homeland to which they must at all costs return, even if it means pushing other peoples into the sea. (...) Diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference" (Hall, 1990).

The narrator's casual encounters with his neighbours offer him other splashes of memories. The old man in the apartment, who is often seen to be sitting in the lobby and asking people to guess his age, reminds him of his own grandfather: "He reminds me of Grandpa as he sits on the sofa in the lobby, staring out vacantly at the parking lot. Only difference is, he sits with the stillness of stroke victims, while Grandpa's Parkinson's disease would bounce his thighs and legs and arms all over the place. When he could no longer hold the *Bombay Samachar* steady enough to read, Grandpa took to sitting on the veranda and staring emptily at the traffic passing outside Firozsha Baag." He can recall even the minutest details of his grandfather's suffering with Parkinson's disease and osteoporosis, his mother's taking care of him and the boy's active participation in it, the fracture of his hip joint and his ultimate stay in Parsi general hospital. The medical smell associated with the old man in the apartment brings back in his mind the nauseating smell of the Parsi general hospital and his grandfather's unconscious condition. The memory of the fatal news of his death that had come over telephone in the neighbouring house has been effectively conveyed. All the details seem to be chained to each other and crowd the memory of the narrator at the faintest initiation, almost like the train of thoughts engulfing the narrator in Charles Lamb's essay "Dream Children: A Reverie". And just as Lamb's reverie was initiated by his lonely existence, Kersi is propelled towards recapitulations from his early life by his isolated existence in the host country. His sexual fantasies, on the other hand, for the female swimming instructor and his voyeuristic pleasure for the two sunbathing women outside his apartment are also born of his physical and mental isolation.

The most potent metaphor in the story is that of swimming round which the story revolves. Swimming is a technique of keeping one afloat on the surface of water. It becomes the metaphor for keeping an individual afloat in an adverse condition, which is, in this case, an alien country. The very idea of swimming brings into him the memory of his unsuccessful attempts of swimming in the dirty Chaupatty beach in Bombay. This in turn initiates a stream of thoughts involving the urchins from the nearby slums performing various obscene pranks around the narrator and his mother in the sea water. The feeling of repulsion is strong enough to traverse time and space to invade the narrator years away in time and miles away in space: "the deep blue sea of Chaupatty beach was grey and murky with garbage, too filthy to swim in. Every so often we would muster our courage and Mummy would take me there to try and teach me. But a few minutes of paddling was all we could endure. Sooner or later something would float up against our legs or thighs or waists, depending on how deep we'd gone in, and

we'd be revulsed and stride out to the sand." In such places there is found contradictory feelings towards the life left behind—the minute recollection symbolises the attraction for that life while the squalor of it his dislike, which perhaps contributed to his migration and subsequent settlement in Canada. Here Mistry is seen to be utilising the advantage of the distance from his motherland to critique it. In the words of Wendy Walters "Displacement creates a distance that allows writers to encode critiques of their homelands" (Sarwal, 2017, p. 5).

Mistry's large reliance upon his own experiences has given him a confidence to handle his subject matter with ease. He had to overcome at the same time the problems of dealing with two levels of narrative at the same time—autobiography and fiction. His is the predicament that every artist faces "When your work and life make one, when they are interwoven in the same fabric" as James Joyce puts it (Ellmann, 1982, p. 149). The art of writing about the life that one is living also earns the artist a detachment from what happened to him, for he knows well that he can reconsider and re-order his materials as he is putting them in the book. In the process the narrative becomes what W.B. Yeats has termed a "disguised autobiography", as does Mistry's story and Kersi Boyce becomes for Mistry what Stephen Dedalus is for Joyce.

The creative genius of Mistry has been backed up by his peculiar heritage of mixed identity. He is a postcolonial writer and yet has hailed from a minority community in India that supported the British rule in India during the colonial period and adopted the British culture and lifestyle to a great extent. As Morey has stated, "His writing provides a wry, but occasionally tragic perspective on the postcolonial nation of India: a perspective from the margins, so to speak. Likewise, the diverse inheritance he enjoys, both as a postcolonial subject and as a member of an ethnic and religious minority group which historically favoured the British and adopted British cultural values in the days of the Raj, can be seen in the literary influences on his fiction, which include the great works of nineteenth- and twentieth-century European literature, the key texts of Indian literature in English, and the Persian epic storytelling tradition. Moreover, Mistry's life and writing can be seen to interrogate 'the national' as a supposedly adequate signifier of identity on a number of levels" (Morey, 2004, p. 3). He can, therefore, see the reality of both the native life and the life in Canada from more than one perspective, without being solely confined in the narrow cage of nostalgic reminiscence. He goes on to interrogate the lives both in the native country and in diaspora and shows the impossibility of escape from any of the realities.

III. CONCLUSION

The reliance on memory is a hallmark of diaspora literature, but all the diaspora authors are also seen to be overcoming the pull of the left-behind life coming to them in the form of memories to accept the new life abroad. Therefore, as the more the protagonists go on adapting themselves to the new life, the lesser is the claim of memory upon them. This is seen in Mistry's narrative also as the long passages of reminiscence contract into short ones with a sentence or two as he endeavours to accept the new reality wholeheartedly instead of wistfully looking back. Instead of being rooted to one culture and one country, the protagonist moves forward to find out routes into the new culture. This progress from roots, i.e. being rooted to a specific culture, to routes, i.e. going out of a culture, characterizes them. For them, "roots located in a specific place of origin gives way to an increasing sense of routes along which people have moved and continue to move", as John Eade has been quoted saying in Sarwal (Sarwal, 2017, p. 1). In the typical fashion of diaspora living, Mistry's protagonist seems to be guided by the dictum that "Home is where your feet and your heart may be there too" (Parameswaran, 1987), thereby accepting the life abroad overcoming the demand of the native life upon him. The ending of the story with Kersi resolute to learn swimming symbolizes his determination to brave all the adversities in the host country. Shaking off his 'being' an ethnic subject he moves forward towards 'becoming' what the host country demands of him as seen from the standpoint of Homi Bhabha (Kamboureli, 1994).

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