

ROHINTON MISTRY AS A DIASPORIC AUTHOR		Literature
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Abstract

The writings of the Indian Diaspora have received a great deal of attention and critical acclaim throughout the world. Rohinton Mistry is a well renowned author in the contemporary commonwealth literature and occupies a significant place among the writers of Indian Diaspora. Even though he is settled in Canada; it is his upbringing in Mumbai that reflects in all his writings. The distinct Mumbai culture, particularly the Parsee way of life, the people of the city and even the politics of India are major themes in his novels. Rohinton Mistry as a writer of Diaspora has carved a niche for himself. His works such as: “Tales from Firozsha Baag”, “Such A Long Journey”, “A Fine Balance” and “Family Matters”; mark a new kind of writing, resulting from a fragmented, splintered world. As a Diasporic Parsi writer, very sensitively he has recalled his community’s journey through time and history with a sense of loss and nostalgia. His books portray diverse facets of Indian socioeconomic life; as well as Parsi Zoroastrian life, customs, and religion. Many of his writings are markedly “Indo-nostalgic”. Rohinton Mistry through his Diasporic discourse has well depicted his ancestral background, his community’s engaged situation in a metropolis like Bombay and his deep attachment with and nostalgia for a world gone by. In this paper an attempt has been made to delineate diasporic discourse in the works of Rohinton Mistry. Although he is obsessed with the colonial and postcolonial experiences in India, we can find some traces of Canada in his literature. His characters dream of being integrated into, and accepted by, Canadian society on the one hand and on the other hand, these same characters are torn by an insatiable desire to be true to their native culture; to honor and cherish their own, distinct cultural identity.

The writings of the Indian Diaspora have received a great deal of attention and critical acclaim. Indian Diasporic writers such as Kiran Desai, Salman Rushdie, Rohinton Mistry, Jhumpa Lahiri have been recipients of International literary awards. There are certain common themes in the representations of the Indian diasporic experience by the diasporic writers. They share a common history, culture and spiritual beliefs such as issues of identity, problems of history, and confrontations with racism, intergenerational conflicts, and difficulties in building new supportive communities.” Through their literature, they have projected the dilemmas and the struggles of the Indian Diaspora.

The Indian Diasporic writers have been divided into two distinct groups- the first group comprises of those who have spent a part of their life and the second group comprises those who have carried the baggage of their native land off shore. The literature of the Indian Diaspora constitutes some of the better-known authors such as V.S. Naipaul, Salman Rushdie, Rohinton Mistry, Bharati Mukherjee, Amitav Ghosh, Jhumpa Lahiri, Anita Desai, M.G. Vassanji, Shyam Selvadurai, and Kiran Desai. The growing international visibility of these authors has gone hand in hand with the popularity of postcolonial criticism and theory in academy.

Uma Parameswaran recognizes the experiences of Indo-Canadians as expressed through literature to be unique in their own right: “The literature of Canadian writers born on the Indian subcontinent (India, Sri Lanka, Pakistan and Bangladesh) is varied in content and form, but common to all of them is a passionate faith in their own voice that is raised to express their Canadian experience . . . [Indo-Canadian writers] bring to their writing not only racial memory and contemporary history, but the poetic traditions and modes of India.”

Rohinton Mistry is a well renowned author in the contemporary commonwealth literature and occupies a significant place among the writers of Indian Diaspora. Being a writer of Indian Diaspora he has been fairly centre-stage in the last decade primarily due to the theatrical formulations which is now being generated by the critiquing of his work and the growing interest in culture study. Moreover, he is also a Zoroastrian Parsi whose ancestors were exiled by the Islamic conquest of Iran, putting him and his kind in Diaspora in the Indian subcontinent.

Parsi community is the core of his fiction. Every work of his is a reflection of Parsi culture, their customs, rituals, struggles, their dilemmas, etc and all these are well communicated through the fine portrayal of Parsi characters. Mistry himself had left for Canada seeking good fortune. The ambiguous and ambivalent lives are the consequence of identity crisis and conflicts faced by the diasporic people. Many times when a person adopts a new world, he is victim of that ignorance due to which he becomes a secondary creature in a foreign land. As a writer of Diaspora Rohinton Mistry also portrays this identity quest. He writes on the identical struggle of the Parsis.

Even though he is settled in Canada, it is his upbringing in Mumbai that reflects in all his writings. The distinct Mumbai culture, particularly the Parsee way of life, the people of the city and even the politics of India are major themes in his novels. His works include an anthology of short-stories, “Tales from Firozsha Baag” (1987), followed by three novels “Such A Long Journey” (1991), “A Fine Balance” (1995) and “Family Matters” (2002) which were shortlisted for the prestigious Booker Prize. His latest work, “Scream” was published in 2008. His novels and short stories have been widely appreciated and were also bestowed with numerous awards and recognition.

“Tales from Firozsha Baag” is a book of eleven inter-related short stories. It deals with the Parsi residents in an apartment complex ‘Firozsha Baag’ in Mumbai. Mistry narrates the day to day joys and sorrows, trials and tribulations of the Parsis. The three short stories namely, ‘Squatters’, ‘Lend Me Your Light’ and ‘Swimming Lessons’ sharply focus on the identity crisis of the Parsi. The stories concern themselves with the ordeals, sufferings and the particular characteristics and mannerisms of Bombay Parsis. Mistry explores the relationships existing within this community, their cultural identity and the uniqueness of their community living. At the same time, he attempts to understand and indeed, fully embrace the hybrid/syncretic nature of the diasporic Parsi experience whether that is in North America, Canada or in India. Some of the stories deal with the journeys undertaken by some Parsi residents of Firozsha Baag.

In his short stories, there is a brilliant illustration of the feeling of displacement quite often. Set in an alien setting in Canada and at home in Bombay, “Tales from Firozsha Baag” offer insights in dramatizing the Parsi world view, in relation to the levels of ‘assimilation’ and ‘westernization’. The stories, “Auspicious Occasion”, “One Sunday”, “The Ghost of Firozsha Baag”, “Condolence Visit”, “The Collectors”, “Of White Hairs and Cricket”, “The Paying Guests”, and “Exercises” focus on people and their experiences as a Parsi community which also forms the background for the stories, namely, “Squatter”, “Lend Me Your Light”, and “Swimming Lessons”. In the last set of stories, Mistry deals with the impact of expatriation on the lives of young Parsi protagonists abroad. Since these stories deal with the writing of the immigrant experience they suggest a parallel to Rohinton Mistry, the immigrant writer who develops his themes from his past experiences in India and his immigrant experiences in Canada. Nostalgia and a mood of reminiscence mark the pages as Mistry recalls and relives his childhood and adolescent years in the Parsi ‘Baag’. These stories set wholly or partially in Canada and display to the maximum extent the vision of the diasporic aspect. In these stories, Mistry transfers the experience from India to Canada and the diasporic trauma of belonging to a minority group in India.

His novel “Such a Long Journey” is set in Mumbai with the political backdrop of Indo-Pak war leading to the birth of Bangladesh. As a diasporic text, Such a Long Journey retains many features from the ‘homeland’. In a sense of alienation, Rohinton Mistry has given a detailed description of his community. While history and language play an important part in the construction of the community’s self-image, the novel also pays close attention to another pillar of Parsi identity i.e. religion. Zoroastrianism is the religion of the Parsi community, which in the course of the novel has been described in detail. The novel starts with Gustad Noble performing ‘kusti’ prayer – the most important ritual in Zoroastrianism. And later the burial rites of the religion at Tower of Silence are described in a detailed manner. Thus we see religion is an important marker of identity that Mistry inscribes into the novel in order to underline a concern with cultural difference. Such a Long Journey being a diasporic text exhibits the leitmotif of ‘journeying’ also which is central to most diasporic writing. Such a Long Journey is a squarely diasporic discourse in which Mistry has openly tried to deconstruct and repossess his Indian past. Here in this novel there is greater engagement with India than there was in the Tales from Firozshah Baag. Here the Parsi world interacts at the highest level with the post-colonial Indian world. Mistry prefers to write about India, which engages his imagination. Rohinton Mistry’s works mark a new kind of writing, resulting from a fragmented, splintered world. As a Diasporic Parsi writer, very sensitively he has recalled his community’s journey through time and history with a sense of loss and nostalgia.

“A Fine Balance” chronicles the state of emergency declared in 1975 by Indira Gandhi until the assassination of Indira Gandhi in 1984. In the novel, “A Fine Balance”, we are again in India, during the mid seventies when Indira Gandhi has declared a state of internal emergency without consultation of her cabinet. The story revolves around the lives of four protagonists each very different from the next. They find themselves thrown together in the same humble city

apartment: Dinabhai, a widow who refuses to remarry and fights to earn a meager living as a seamstress; two tailors, Ishvar and Omprakash, uncle and nephew, who have come to the city in the hope of finding work; and a student, Maneck Kohlah, from a village situated at the foothills of the Himalayas. Rohinton Mistry's depiction of atrocities and dismal quality of life is truly highly realistic. His protagonists belong to marginalized community and writer depicts how tragedy looms large over their fragile Themes Seen in Indian Diasporic Writing. Nilufer Bharucha has explored the multiple aspects of Mistry's works: his search for identity, his need for roots and the desire for location in history.

Rohinton Mistry is truly a writer of Indian Diaspora. He left India in 1975 and does not often go back; even then he has beautifully portrayed the experience of immigration, the immense pain of not being with his own people. Even as a writer of Diaspora, he has carved a niche for himself. About his Diaspora status, Nilufer Bharucha says: "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 ancestor's 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."

Mistry's third novel, "Family Matters" depicts contemporary Bombay and is set in the 1990s. At the centre of the book is an old man, a Parsi, Nariman Vakeel with Parkinson's disease. He is a retired academic - a professor of English - whose illness strains family relationships. He even compares himself to King Lear at one point. His memories of the past expose the reader to earlier moments in the city's, and the nation's history in a novel that moves across three generations of the same family. The private and public histories intersect in this novel too. Family Matters depicts Parsee community's struggle to preserve their identity in hostile environment. It is a consideration of the difficulties that come with ageing.

Mistry's latest book, "The Scream" (2008), has been illustrated by the famous Canadian artist Tony Urquhart. The story is located in a Bombay apartment and narrated by a man at the end of his life, who is angry at the predicament of old age, at his isolation from his family and from a world that no longer understands him. He rants and raves at the unfairness of his situation in a way reminiscent of old Mr. Pastakia in "Such a Long Journey". His complaints have both humor and pathos. His soliloquies are about ageing which is a universal phenomenon. When a man becomes old and ceases to be a breadwinner, he becomes less influential and important and more dependent upon others. The protagonist of "The Scream" is such a man who is neglected and misunderstood by his family and society. Rohinton Mistry's books portray diverse facets of Indian socioeconomic life; as well as Parsi Zoroastrian life, customs, and religion. Many of his writings are markedly "Indo-nostalgic".

Thus, we can say that Rohinton Mistry through his Diasporic discourse has well depicted his ancestral background, his community's encaged situation in a metropolis like Bombay and his deep attachment with and nostalgia for a world gone by in spite of being a citizen of Canada. He is

well aware of his community's efforts to maintain their cultural identity in the face of the ethnic and religio-cultural attacks in the post-imperial and post-independent India and hence he has meticulously presented it. The politico-cultural nostalgia helps Mistry to create a sense of loss about the changed circumstances of the characters in both domestic and public spheres. Through skilful blending of the character's personal affairs with communal and political matters related to Bombay and India he lends them significance as social beings. Mistry's meticulous description makes the readers feel as if they are walking into the streets of Bombay, visiting the houses of Parsi community and experiencing the muddled affairs of Indian politics in postcolonial India.

While delineating diasporic discourse in the works of Rohinton Mistry we find little traces of Canada but he is obsessed with the colonial and postcolonial experiences in India. He recollects the memories of his place of origin that is Bombay and also portrays his own religious community the Parsi community. As a Parsi as well as an immigrant in Canada we confront double displacement as a recurrent theme in his literary works.

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