

Cultural Space of The Diasporic Writer: A Study of Novels by Rohinton Mistry

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Abstract: Rohinton Mistry is an Indian Parsi writer settled in Canada. His works portray the cultural space of the minority Parsi community in Bombay. His works also propose to look at the Parsi way of life, their customs, and rituals, their history and also the anxieties felt by the community. Rohinton Mistry as a minority writer in Canada tries to bring his ethnic community closer to the mainstream to fight marginalization. He positions himself as a Bombay born Parsi Indian in Canada, who like, every diasporic writer is conscious of his self, his cultural identity and the ethnic community to which he belongs. In a de-territorialised world his Parsi culture has given him a cultural identity in a borderless world and is apprehensive of the future of the Parsi community which is dwindling in number. Through his works he tries to preserve his history and culture. He has celebrated the Parsi idiom in his writings. Mistry writes from the cultural space of an ethnic community. Most of his novels are set in the city of Bombay. Postcolonial writers locate their community firmly within their multicultural spaces. Community lives are located within the space of the land. It also gives us a sense of our place in the world. The reality of a community lies in it's members perception of the vitality of it's culture. People construct a community making it a repository of meaning and a referent of their identity. Rohinton Mistry writes from the stand point of an ethnic, Parsi, Indian in a multicultural space like Canada.

Keywords: Diasporic community, cultural space, parsi, Bombay, ethnic minority, positioning of writers.

Diasporic literature often projects the consciousness of the communal or racial collective such as Asian American, Non- Resident Indian, and Blacks. Diasporic writing is an expression of this shared identity of being dislocated and is a principal theme in the fiction from Caribbean, Asian American and other countries. What this means is that national, ethnic, or communal identities are constituted in the absence of a territory. Non Resident Indians, for instance are Indians residing outside the politico-geographical territory of India. They retain their Indian identity despite the loss of a homeland. This is perhaps the most curious and paradoxical theme in postcolonial diasporic writing. Diasporic communities hold on to their traditions in an almost desperate effort to retain their original culture. Caught up in a national culture in whose cultural life the migrant community may have little or no role to play, the community clings to it's own customs and cultural codes. In the case of diasporic writing, there occurs a certain anxiety of original culture and home. There is a conscious attempt to keep India within the collective and individual, intellectual and emotional imaginaries. It becomes a survival device - an

attempt to gain cultural citizenship within the same community. Cultural citizenship can be defined as the maintenance and development of cultural lineage through education, custom, language, and religion. Earlier patterns of Asian diasporic experiences enabled the creation of more bounded communities. There is a great deal of home in the narratives of immigrants. Cultural citizenship is an attempt to deal with dislocation through an imaginative re-location within their collective memories, nostalgia, and customs. It is an act not just of committing to memory, but a way of making real their connections to home. It is therefore a memorealization, where collective festivities or histories enable a return to a space that they have not quite forgotten. Thus a community moves through a culturalist nationalist stage into a political one. Diasporic communities reassert the myth of the homeland. Since they cannot actually return to the material spaces of their homelands, it can only be invoked as symbols and iconography. This might even involve internalizing the homeland. Diasporic postcolonial writing is also about de and re-territorialization. Homelands can get inscribed into a new location in a curious paradox of re-territorialization, where the material culture and spatial location is foreign while the metaphoric space is 'home.'

My paper attempts to emphasise the role of diaspora in bringing ethnic communities and classes closer to the mainstream and also to show how writer's (Rohinton Mistry) position themselves culturally. There are a few novelists like Rohinton Mistry whose works centralize their community and homeland. (Parsi and the city of Bombay). This is especially true of immigrant writers from the minority communities who were " gripped by the conviction that" they "too had a city and a history to reclaim. " (10) (*Imaginary Homelands*) According to Jaydipsinh Dodiya, in "The Parsi Community in *Such a Long Journey*." "their works exhibit consciousness of their community in a way that, the community emerges as a protagonist. " (92) The Parsis migrated from Iran to the west coast of India to escape religious persecution in the eighth century. They were permitted by local rulers to stay and practice their faith. Mistry is a Parsi Zoroastrian and all his works portray the cultural and even the material space to which he belongs. Parsi writers are also sensitive to the various anxieties felt by their communities. Rohinton Mistry has demonstrated this in responding to the existing threats to the Parsi family and community and also to the country. He presents his community through the different narratives of his characters who express their concern for their community and the changes that affect their community. By centralizing their community in their narratives, they preserve their culture. As an Indian who lives and writes from Canada, Rohinton Mistry is a writer of the Indian Diaspora. The bonding of culture, religion, literature and language is especially strong in a diasporic situation which provides him with an ethnic identity and a sense of self. He has celebrated the unique Parsi idiom in his writing. In his stories he records the Parsi culture. Mistry writes from the cultural space of an ethnic minority.

Mistry's first novel *Such a Long Journey* deals with the Parsi environment in India, set against the backdrop of the subcontinent's volatile postcolonial politics. The action takes place in 1971 in Bombay at the moment when war breaks out between India and Pakistan. Gustard Noble is a devout Parsi in Bombay. The novel begins with Noble offering prayers to Ahura Mazda. Ahura Mazda is the creator as well as judge on the day of the last judgement. He rules as the ultimate supreme lord of eternity over the good spirits created by him. "The first light of morning barely illumined the sky as Gustad Noble faced eastward to offer his orisons to Ahura Mazda." (1 SLJ) There is also a mention of the kusty prayers that is offered to the god. The recitation of the Yatha Ahu Varyo and the Ashem Vahoo are reminiscent of the religious faith of the Parsis. Gustad's reverence for his Parsi faith is all the more obvious when he thinks "dabbling in religions was distasteful and irreverent, an affront to the other faith and his own." (222) The Tower of Silence referred to in many novels of Mistry is also important to the Parsis, as they place their dead ones in The Tower of Silence instead of burying the dead. After offering the rituals the dead bodies are given as food to the vultures. "And after the prayers are said and the rituals performed at the Tower of Silence, the vultures will do the rest." (238 SLJ). The dead are deposited in the Tower of Silence so that none of the four elements, earth, air water and especially fire should be contaminated.

Most important of Parsi rites are purification ceremonies. Fire is very important in Zoroastrian Cult, it is the symbol of Ahura Mazda, the light and the truth. The Parsis revere the sun, moon, fire, water, earth and all creations of God. Fire is considered sacrosanct. In the words of N. Jayaram in *De(re) Territorialised Communities and the Imagined Civilization - The Indian Diaspora* says :

In spite of their separation and dispersion from India in space and time, as a community, by and large, the diasporic Indians have not integrated socially and culturally into their host society. Rather, as most diasporics do, they 'continue to relate, personally or vicariously to the homeland in one way or another, and their ethno communal consciousness and solidarity are importantly defined by the existence of such a relationship.' (Safran 1991, 4).

Facilitating this is the cultural heritage, which is a positive point of reference not only defining their cultural consciousness but also creating and sustaining an imagined civilization. (39) The Navjote is the ritual through which an individual is inducted into the Zoroastrian religion. Hence forth one begins to wear the Sedreh and Kushti. The term Navjote is used primarily by the Zoroastrians of India, while Sedreh Pushi is used primarily by the Zoroastrians of Iran. The word Navjote is a Latinized form of the Parsi Gujarati compound of Nav (New) and Jote (Reciter/ prayer, invoker, sacrifice). Navjote find a reference in many a novels of Mistry. He also records the rich variety of Parsi cuisine in his works-- chicken, mutton- mince, cutlet, kebab, Dhan Sak, patra -nimachhi, margi-na- farcha and lagan - nu- custard -- all special delicacies of the Parsis.

A Fine Balance is another novel of Mistry that portray Parsi characters and culture. Parsi faith and prayers at the fire temple once again finds place in the novel when Nusswan takes an interest to persuade Dina to pray at the fire temple once a week. His devotion for the Parsi faith is evident from the reverence paid to the various dustoors and priests and mainly to the picture of Zarathustra. "... And ending with the very tall picture of Zarathustra to which he glued his lips for a full minute. Then from the vessel of ashes placed in the sanctum doorway, he smeared a pinch on his forehead...." (AFB 20-21) Peter Morey says, "Great emphasis is placed on purity in Zoroastrian doctrine and practice. One example is the way in which the sacred fire is carefully tended and kept free from pollution. This interest in issues of purity is exercised by Mistry in his works." (8) In *Family Matters* we find Yezad going to the Fire Temple on Navroze and Khordad Sal. For Roxana it was all ritual and religion for she had been taught the prayers, performed her Navjote, and taken to the fire temple for every holy day. Yezad's displeasure at his son's decision to marry a Maharashtrian girl is evident when he tells him "Because we are a pure Persian race, a unique contribution to this planet, and mixed marriages will destroy that." (FM 482) Mistry brings to our notice the innumerable number of contributions made by Parsi to Modern India.

When you think of our forefathers, the industrialists and shipbuilders who established the foundation of modern India, the philanthropists who gave us our hospitals and schools and libraries and bags what lustre they brought to our community and the nation. (FM 51)

Mistry also records the stories from the Shah-Namah about King Jamshed, about Rustum and Sohrab in *Family Matters*. Historically the Shah-Namah, composed by Firdausi, made up of fifty thousand rhyming couplets traces the story of the Iranian nation from it's first ruler to the defeat of the last Sassanian King by Arab armies in the mid seventh century. In it a number of narrative strata are woven together : a creation myth; local legends such as the cycle involving the hero Rustom, dynastic struggles; romance and the appearance of Zarathustra and the spread of his religion. The dwindling number of Parsis in Bombay is also a concern for Mistry. "Demographics show we'll be extinct in fifty years." (51) Even though a small community right from the beginning the Parsis have prospered. But the mass migration to the West, the dwindling birth rate of the Parsis and the marriage between Parsis and non-Parsis have led to dwindling number of Parsis. *Tales from Firozsha Baag* contains the most personal and sensitive subject matter of Mistry's books. Named after the apartment building in Bombay where many of the principal characters live, this collection examines the nature of communal and personal identity from a Parsi perspective. Throughout the eleven stories the major characters reappear as recurring figures lending a sense of interpersonal connection among the residents of Firozsha Baag. The characters represent Parsis at odds with their religious beliefs and the larger community. Mistry explores the uniqueness of their community living. *Tales From Firozsha Baag* also contains references to the fire

temple, Navjote, Ashem Vahoo prayers, Mathoobanoo, Dada Ormuzd, special dishes like Sali- boti, dhandar paatyoo, dhansaak masala, Persian epic Shah- Namah, Avan Yazad, Zoroastrian, the contributions of Parsis to India which are part and parcel of the Parsi community. In short, all the novels of Mistry are strewn with words which recreate life in a Parsi community. The story "Swimming Lessons" from *Tales from Firozsha Baag* contains a word of praise for the Parsi community: "there was so much to be proud of : the great Tatas and their contribution to the steel industry, or Sir Dinshaw Petit in the textile industry who made Bombay the Manchester of the East, or Dadabhai Naoroji in the freedom movement..... and in reality it was the richest, most advanced and philanthropic community in India..... something also about the historic background, how Parsis came to India from Persia and were the descendants of Cyrus the Great and the magnificent Persian Empire." (TFFB 295-296) Stuart Hall in 'The Local and the Global' says :

Our lives have been transformed by the struggle of the margins to come into representation. Not just to be placed by the regime of some other, or imperializing eye but to reclaim some form of representation for themselves... (34)

Marginality has become a powerful space. They have acquired through struggle, sometimes in very marginalized ways, the means to speak for themselves, the marginal and the local. The subjects of the local, of the margin can only come into representation to recover their own hidden histories. They try to retell their story. The face-to-face communities that are knowable, that are locatable, one can give them a place. Ethnicity is the necessary place or space from which people speak. Rohinton Mistry writes from the standpoint of an ethnic, Parsi, Indian. Parsis are subject to marginalization.

Mistry's novels can be described as novels that centre most vividly on the Bombay of his youth. He has reconstructed the Bombay city pointing to some of the threats faced by minorities in Bombay. Mistry portrays the Bombay ruled by Shina Sena leader who wants "Maharashtra for Maharashtrians." (SLJ 73) They had distributed racist pamphlets aimed against minorities in Bombay. Gustad feels that there is "no future for minorities with all these fascist Shiv Sena politics." (55) *Family Matters* also portray the political activities of The Shiv Sena in Bombay, trying to spread hatred towards the minorities. There was also an attempt to burn letters and postcards if the address reads Bombay instead of Mumbai. Mistry through his characters shows his dislike for the way Bombay is destroyed by Goonda Raj and mafia dons. He says through the words of Yezad: "I am a born-and-bred Bombayvala. That automatically inoculates me against attacks of outrage." (FM 155) Bombay Sporting owner Mr Kapur is passionate about the city of Bombay. He says "You know how I'm always talking about Bombay - how much it means to me, how much it has given mebecause Bombay is everything to me." (FM 157) Bombay to Kapur is a place worth making a home. . "In her heart, there is room for everyone who wants to make a home here." (159) Kapur falls a victim to ShivSena activists who kill him for not changing

the name board of his shop from Bombay to Mumbai. Mistry criticizes the policies of Indira Gandhi and the reactionist politics of the ShivSena party.

Tales from Firozsha Baag is also set in an apartment building in Bombay. The short story "Lend me Your Light" throws light on life in Bombay to Jamshed and Percy. It is a nostalgic rendering of the narrator's last days in Bombay before migrating to Toronto. "And thus was spent my last day in Bombay, the city of all my days till then..... the neighbourhood I grew up in, with the chemists store, the Irani restaurant, the sugarcane juice vendor, the fruit - and - vegetable stall in TarGully...." (218) The short story 'Swimming Lessons' records "Sena agitation about Maharashtra for Maharashtrians" (278). Minute descriptions of beaches, apartments, streets - Chaupatty beach, Bhindi Bazaar, Lohar Chawl, Crawford Market - find expression in Mistry's short story. *A Fine Balance* set in Bombay, India between 1975 and 1984 exposes the changes in Indian society during the Emergency period. The effects of the Emergency bother many a character in the novel. Om and Ishwar were subjected to forced sterilization and the beautification program of the government forced many people to move into the streets. Stuart Hall in *Cultural Identity and Diaspora* says:

We all write and speak from a particular place and time and from a history and culture that is specific. What we say is always 'in context', positioned. (110)

Cultural identity is defined in terms of one shared culture. Our cultural identities reflect the common historical experiences and shared cultural codes. Cultural identities have their histories-- and histories have their real, material and symbolic effects. The past continues to speak to us. It is always constructed through memory, fantasy, narrative and myth. Cultural identities are the points of identification, made within the discourses of history and culture. Not an essence but a positioning. In an age where everyone is a migrant in some form or the other the notion of home itself needs to be radically defined. Home is now usually a routine set of practices, in a repetition of habitual interactions, in a regularly used name. Fall into a pattern of behavior in diasporic communities entails a cognition of the context in which one is presently located and recognition that there is a new context that doubles as home. Postcolonial works deal with issues of community and cultural identity. Postcolonial writers locate the self firmly within communities and their spaces. Community lives are connected to the space of the land. Diasporas are communities of people living together in one country who acknowledge the old country--a notion often buried in language, religion, customs or folklore. The emphasis on collectivity and community is very important as diasporic writers look across time and space to another. Postcolonial literature also probes how home is imagined in diaspora communities. It acts as a valuable means of orientation by giving us a sense of our place in the world. It tells us where we originated from and where we belong. To be at home is to occupy a location where we are welcome, where we can be with people very much like ourselves. To the

migrants who live far from their homelands, writing about his homeland and community is an attempt to restore the world of his childhood past, his community, his homeland. Speaking of Indian migrants, Rushdie writes in *Imaginary Homelands*: “Our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that is lost; that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind.” (10) While the past becomes an imaginary place in the mind, it is a place nonetheless to look back to and find inspiration from, a place to identify with.

Another important aspect is the relational positioning of writers by virtue of the race. There is, for instance, African, Caribbean, South Asian constructed in the diasporic space. Blacks, Chinese, Indians, Japanese are differentiated within their racialized formation. “These racisms are not simply parallel racisms but are intersecting modalities of differential racialisations marking positionality across articulating fields of powers.”, says Avtar Brah in *Cartographies of Diaspora*. Rohinton Mistry is seen as a Canadian, Indian and Parsi writer by many of these formations. In the words of Jan Mohammed and Lloyd, “Minority discourse, means a theoretical articulation of the political and cultural structures that connect different minority cultures in their subjugation and opposition to the dominant culture.” (ix) A minority location is a question of position that can be defined in terms of cultural and political categories within the liberal theory of political representation. In other words minorities are positioned in relation not only to 'majorities' but also with respect to one another, and viceversa. The position of writers as migrant / diasporic / minority may have important implication for the formation of subjectivity. Positioning or positionality becomes a means to fight exploitation and marginality.

Mistry himself have said that he would like to write a Canadian novel, but Bombay keeps getting in the way. Born and raised in a Parsi area of Bombay, he has tried to depict his Parsi community in Bombay, their customs, religious rituals and beliefs, the Emergency period of Indira Gandhi and forced sterilization on slum dwellers, the Shiv Sena threats in Bombay that made life miserable for minorities in Bombay. As a postcolonial writer Mistry has tried to reclaim his past. As Fanon writes in *The Wretched of the Earth*, “the consciousness of self is not the closing of a door to communication.” (199). He has tried to retain his Parsi Indian identity by way of being conscious of his culture. Stuart Hall says in *Thinking the Diaspora*, “.....it is assumed that cultural identity is fixed by birth, part of nature, imprinted through kinship and lineage in the genes, constitutive of our inner-selves. It is impermeable to something as worldly, secular and superficial as temporarily moving one's place of residence.” (545) Mistry has been successful in bringing his ethnic community (marginal) closer to the mainstream. Diasporic presence in multicultural societies has often been characterized by a clash of cultures as people wrestle with how to preserve their cultural identities in an increasingly borderless commercial world. In a de-territorialized world,

culture has provided the diasporic Indian their identity marker vis-à-vis other ethnic or nationality groups and a strong link with the ancestral homeland. The reality of a community lies in its members perception of the vitality of its culture. People construct a community symbolically, making it a resource and repository of meaning, and a referent of their identity.

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