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The Parsis of Rohinton Mistry: An Analysis of the Trajectory through which the Parsis Travelled in India

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Abstract

After the Parsis' exodus in 7th Century A.D from Persia in the wake of the Muslim onslaught, they adjusted well in India. However time brought a sea change. My paper through a study of the novels and short stories of Rohinton Mistry depicts how a revered minority from the British colonial times not only fell to the politics of post-Independence India but also a great rift occurred in their own philosophy of life and thinking. Mistry belonging to the "New Diaspora", has an ambivalent take on migration. My paper acutely travels through the liminality of the

hybrid existence of the Parsis. It reflects the Parsi acculturation in the Indian Society and away, which could never do away with their alienation. This resulted in their yearning for a permanence in their roots. My paper critically studies the ambivalent attitude of the Parsi diaspora in the problematic narrative of Mistry.

Key words: Parsi diaspora, Hybridity, Identity, Liminal, Migration, Roots.

"Hame hinustaan rayr bashim" or "We shall be the friends of all India" (Dipanjali 11), is what a Dastoor or a Parsi Zoroastrian priest said after arriving in Gujarat with a mass in the 8th Century A.D. fleeing from Persia in the wake of Muslim onslaught. Though initially the Parsis adjusted well with the natives, it slowly changed with the advent of the British colonial rule in India. Hailed as the only Indian minority with a progressive enterprise, the Parsis acculturated themselves well with the British culture and customs only to alienate themselves further from the natives of India as well as from their own Zoroastrian faith and people. With massive migrations to the West, the Parsis have only left their community in a greater moribund state. Rohinton Mistry (b. 1952), one of the most eminent Parsi writers till date, deals with the Parsi predicament in a ambiguous manner to come to terms with their hybrid existence. Generally, people of the "New Diaspora" or "Visitor Diaspora" betray a tendency to favour migration to the developed West in order to escape the inferior circumstances of their native land. However, a migration can never be self-legitimated in the long run, as a yearning for the roots will always overwhelm the migrated psyche. This is precisely the situation of the characters in Mistry's fiction when after falling prey to the post-Independence Indian politics, they try to find a solution or a solace in the West.

Homi K. Bhabha in his book, *The Location of Culture* (1994), has worked specifically on the minority cultures and how hybridisation of cultures works in creating mixed identities or rather new identities. In order to substantiate these paradigms an analysis of Rohinton Mistry's two novels, *Such a Long Journey* (1991) and *Family Matters* (2002) and some of his stories from the short story anthology *Tales from Firozsha Baag* (1987) has been undertaken.

A clash and a resistance are bound to happen when an ethnocentric community comes in contact with different other cultures. However, this is not entirely true of the Parsis of India initially. After being allowed to settle in Gujarat, they developed and prospered well commercially. They further moved and settled in Bombay which might be called the second home of the Parsi Zoroastrians, after Iran. In the pre-colonial times they always had good relations with the native Indians, a relation extensively fashioned by commercial interests. However the situation started changing with the arrival of the British. A fascination for the British culture started developing within the Parsis, when the former found in them a willingness to learn. The British allured them with their culture in order to win their loyalty as mediators between them and the colonized Indians. This newly acquired status together with a sense of the fairness of their own skin and of a mastery over the English language, helped produce in them an elite consciousness. As a result they started staying aloof from the native Indian society which they suddenly found backward. Not only that, also a discord soon emerged between the anglicized Parsis and the orthodox ones, which disintegrated them further.

In *Family Matters*, while sneering at the Enid Blyton books made available to young students at the school libraries, instead of some collections that deal with Indian and Parsi culture, Yezad says:

> ..it encouraged children to grow up without attachment to the place where they belonged, made them hate themselves for being who they were, created confusion about their identity. He […] read the same books when he was small, and they had made him yearn to become a little Englishman of a type that even England did not have. (Mistry 84)

Here Mistry is highly critical about the Parsis' lack of a sense of belonging and an enchantment for the European culture. A little later in the book, being somewhat hopeless at his sons' obsession for European food such as "muffins, porridge, kippers, scones, steak and kidney pie, potted meat, dumplings", Yezad utters:

> ….if they ever tasted this insipid foreign stuff instead of merely reading about it [..] they would realize how amazing was their mother's curry rice and khichri-saas and pumpkin buryani and dhansak. What they needed was an Indian Blyton, to fascinate them with their own reality. (Mistry 101)

However such a description is, then, undercut by Mistry when just after complaining about the euro-centrism Yezad himself sings with his boys an English song by Engelbert Humperdink. Yezad never strives to make a conscious effort to create an ambience of Indian culture or the Parsi culture or an Indo-Parsi culture in his home and he too gets carried away with the western culture initially. This ambivalence is one of Mistry's specialties in his analysis of problematic situations and here he sees anglophilia embedded deep inside.

For the Parsis, a close contact with a European culture happened after their own Parsi ethnic culture had a close contact with the Indian culture even though they tried to fend it for over eight hundred years. This is germane to our understanding of the cultural coalescence,

resulting from the hybridity of cultures. While defining hybridity, Bhabha notes that "cultures are always in contact with one another and this contact leads to cultural mixedness" (Huddart 4). In the analysis of "hybridization" or hybridity's ongoing process, Bhabha directs our attention to the "in-between" spaces of cultures, which he calls the "liminal" (Huddart 4). It is in these "liminal" spaces that cultural negotiations occur between different cultures or identities, giving rise to new cultural meaning. The "liminal" thus marks the constant process of creating new identities. However, it then becomes natural that such new identities have a constant conflict with their past self and the other. This is evident in case of the Parsis who have always occupied the "liminal" space in India.

In *Such a Long Journey*, Mistry adeptly shows the "Orthodox- Reformist" battle regarding changes in systems: "These two camps had a history of battling lustily in newspaper columns, in letters-to-the-editor, in community meetings- any forum where they were welcome." (Mistry 317). They had fought over the "chemical analysis of *nirang*" , "the vibration theory of Avesta prayers" and now they are fighting over the "vulture controversy" (Mistry 317). The reformists favoured cremation as it is in sync with their progressive reputation, while the orthodox camp wanted the age old system at the Tower of Silence to continue. Mistry, when he treats the plight of marriage in a Parsi community in *Family Matters*, such a strife between these two sects re-emerges. Half of Nariman's life gets lost in his battle to come to terms with his community's orthodox denial of an inter-communal marriage. Lucy Braganza being a Goan Christian could never be accepted by Nariman's zealot parents and community. For Nariman's father it is an act of apostasy since "Modern ideas have filled Nari's head. He never learned to preserve that fine balance between tradition and modernness." (Mistry 15). Ironically such

orthodox consciousness regarding endogamy, functions parallelly with their exclusive imitations of British customs and ways in their community parties and gatherings.

In Mistry's short story "Exercisers" from *Tales from Firozsha Baag* (1987) a situation arrives when the Parsi parents cannot even accept a love relationship blossoming between their son and a girl who is none but a Parsi . Here the problem emerges due to the over-protective and conservative attitude of the Bulsara family (an effect of being exposed to the Hindu conservative culture for centuries) who sees the westernized and stylish Behroze as a seductress, ignoring the girl's softness and sensitivity. R.P. Masani in his book *Dadabhai Naoroji: The Grand Old Man of India* (1939) observes that, "Parsis are, at times, a puzzle to their neighbours. Their virtues lie very close to their weaknesses. The same sterling qualities that contribute towards their intellectual progress drag them down to the abyss of unreasoning orthodoxy." (48). This psychology can be traced back to Bhabha's ideas of hybridity where a community that lies in between borderlines of cultures, falls in a dilemma regarding what to accept and what to reject due to the mixedness. Novy Kapadia declaring it as the "Parsi paradox" in his essay, "The Dilemma of Marriage in Nargis Dalal's *The Sisters*" says: "Most of them are cultural hybrids, living and sharing intimately in the cultural life, traditions, languages, moral codes and value system of two distinct peoples, which never completely penetrate or get fused." (Dhawan 79-80)

Mistry in his fiction also shows how the post-independence political situation under Indira Gandhi in 1970s became detrimental in further alienating the Parsis when there no longer remained any scope of the privilege that they had enjoyed during the colonial regime. The economic policies that Nehruvian Socialism brought affected their business adversely barring the Parsi free enterprise. In *Such a Long Journey,* Dinshawji, an old bank employee who has worked for thirty years ruminates: "What days those were, *yaar*. What fun we used to have. […] Parsis

were the kings 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." (Mistry 38). The community does not take much time to realize that the "crooks" of the Congress Party have made the country "a patient with gangrene at an advanced stage"(313). The anger against Indira Gandhi and Shiv Sena is evident when Dinshawji blasts :

> At once she began encouraging the demands for a separate Maharashtra. How much bloodshed, how much rioting she caused. And today we have that bloody Shiv Sena, wanting to make the rest of us into second-class citizens. Don't forget she started it all by supporting the racist buggers. (39)

In the same novel while pondering his son's future in the face of the hopeless circumstances to which the country has fallen, Gustad reflects: "What kind of life was Sohrab going to look forward to? No future for minorities, with all these fascist Shiv Sena politics and Marathi language nonsense. It was going to be like the black people in America- twice as good as the white man to get half as much" (55). It is a palpable fact that the Parsi's estrangement increased in length and breadth with the disaffection about politics creeping in more and more. Thus finding no panacea for this growing estrangement in the country where they first migrated, Mistry remarks : "And one day, you must go, too, to America. No future here." (Mistry 136).

Whenever the Parsis are confronted with a crisis in India, they long to return to Iran which at times "assumes the garb of the desire to go to the West, their 'tertiary space.'" (Dharan 105). Thus in *Family Matters*, Mistry writes:

> His dream for an end to his apeman commute had led him to apply for immigration to Canada. He wanted clean cities, clean air, plenty of water, train with seats for everyone, where people stood in line at bus stops and said please, after you, thank you. Not just the land of milk and honey, also the land of deodorant and toiletry. (Mistry 118)

Thus, Jamshed in Mistry's short story "Lend Me your Light" from *Tales from Firozsha Baag* (1987) after moving to New York finds Bombay "horrible [..] dirtier than ever" (219). However, Mistry's treatment of the migratory experience is too nuanced to be limited to any simplistic description of rootlessness, an obvious consequence of migration. Despite belonging to the "New Diaspora" or "Visitor Diaspora" of the 20th Century, as Makarand Paranjape would like to place him, I feel, Mistry betrays a subtle attachment to his roots or homeland India. I think, there is no "demonstrating a self-legitimating logic of leaving the homeland behind […] and embracing the new diasporic home." (Paranjape 167). On the contrary, Mistry has an ambivalent take on migration.

According to Bhabha there is an "uncanniness of migrant experience" which works through certain principles (Huddart 53). First, it is a "half life" or a partial presence not being able to get an apt recognition in the migrated country. Second, it tries to repeat the "life lived in the country of origin" which gets transformed from the original by certain differences – the price paid while reviving the past life in the present (53). In "Lend Me your Light" being attracted to the apparent fascination for the West, Kersi puts himself in Jamshed's shoes and moves to Canada. And it is during this displacement and after it , that all the complications start arising. Kersi on the night before catching his flight for Toronto finds himself "guilty of the sin of hubris for seeking emigration out of the land of […] birth." (Mistry 217) Infected with conjunctivitis, he

sees himself as "Tiresias, blind and throbbing between two lives, the one in Bombay and the one to come in Toronto…" (217). Kersi could niether fend the appeals of moving to West nor like his brother could Percy feel that a "Departure beyond the borders of my country would for me be tantamount to death" (Ivinskaya 240-41). Thus with a dilemma he arrives in Toronto only to get more disillusioned by his experiences in the migrated land. A "half life" is what Kersi finds himself in, while searching for places that could give him a nostalgia for his native land. This search is clearly a search to repeat the "life lived in the country of origin" and it is the difference in experiences of living that arises out of this which makes Kersi avoid such quests anymore.

Not being able to vent the pent up anxieties Kersi goes back to Bombay to reconstruct and re-define his ethical identity and a sense of self in order to survive in the alien land. Like Jamshed, he too initially gets disgusted with the squalor of his native land. His expectations to find a reason to stay back in India and hate Canada falls apart in the beginning. But then, with his re-exposure to the Bombay life and with the passage of time Kersi finds: "The disappointment which had overcome me earlier began to ebb. […] I began to feel a part of the crowds which were now flowing down Flora Fountain. I walked with them." (Mistry 229-30). Right then an expected incident happens that makes Kersi's hope fall like a pack of cards. The idealistic ventures of his brother Percy are smashed when a member of his philanthropic group gets murdered while they try to clean the dirty politics of exploitation in villages. Thus finding no proper solution in his homeland, Kersi returns to Toronto with an "entire burden of riddles and puzzles, unsolved." (233). The burden fashioned by the "ambiguities and dichotomies" was "not lightened at all" (233).

Through the portrayal of his characters, Mistry redefines how the double perspective of the members of his Parsi community makes them hanker after an identity in the in-between or "liminal" space, being at the same time the insider and the outsider of the society. After being forced to migrate from Iran , the Parsis could never be at home in India. They could never re-live their past life and their efforts of acculturation only alienated them further. Some tried to find a solution in the West but soon that summed up to a greater disenchantment. Mistry, himself a product of double displacement is equipped with a "stereoscopic vision" (Rushdie 19). With such a vision he ventures through the psyche of his characters to articulate the dilemma of the Parsi diaspora. There could be no solution to such an ambivalent existence, for Mistry already had the epiphany when through Nariman he pronounced that "emigration is an enormous mistake. The biggest anyone can make in their life. The loss of home leaves a hole that never fills." (Mistry 220).

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