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"Canada, Canada, and where is *that* place? In the North Pole, that's where': Perceptions of Canada in South-Asian Immigrant Writing"

Abstract

This paper intends to explore the ways in which Parsi immigrants in Canada experience and deal with cultural differences in some selected short stories from *Swimming Lessons and Other Stories from Firozsha Baag* by Rohinton Mistry, a first-generation contemporary Canadian author from India. It will be discussed to what extent their expectations, dreams and desires are realized, how their identity is affected by the influence of the host country during the process of adaptation and how they cope with the resulting sense of dislocation and try to bridge the gap separating their old home from the new one. Immigration becomes not only a movement in physical space for them but also a journey of discovery of new people and themselves.

Key words: diaspora, Parsi, dislocation, adaptation, identity

"Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet," reads the first line of a ballad published by Rudyard Kipling, this staunch supporter of empire in 1889 (Kipling). The words East and West do not only indicate the geographical directions from which the two men facing each other in the poem come from but also refer to the two distinct civilizations they represent during their encounter in the north-eastern part of the Indian subcontinent. Such incidents between individuals and the clashes of their cultures implied in such events have provided rich soil for cultural and literary theories to grow on ever since. But what happens if the encounter takes place in urban Canada between newly arrived East-Indian immigrants and representatives of mainstream Canadian society in some selected short stories from *Tales from Firozsha Baag* by Rohinton Mistry written a hundred years later than Kipling's ballad? What image of Canada is constructed by the new arrivals? What exchange, if any, takes place between them and the local people?

Tales from Firozsha Baag, also published under the title *Swimming Lessons and Other Stories from Firozsha Baag*, this collection of eleven short stories appears to be rooted in the author's own experience. Like he himself, his main characters are of Parsi background from Mumbai formerly known as Bombay. The fictional Firozsha Baag is the name of a compound in Bombay where the inhabitants are almost exclusively Parsis. This city in India in the East is the home of the majority of Parsis today, whose number is estimated to be around 100,000 worldwide.

As depicted by Mistry, the residents of the compound "display a siege-mentality" (Bharucha 1998: 25). The reasons are historical: the Parsis have always been a minority in India first making their appearance on the subcontinent sometime between the 8th and 10th centuries CE due to the conquest of their homeland in Persia (now Iran) by Muslim Arabs. So their first diaspora on the West Coast of India was the result of their growing conflicts with the newly arrived Muslim conquerors, who challenged both their religious practices and their prosperous trading activities with neighbouring India. But in India, they also had to give up some of their traditions in order to be allowed to practise their ancient Zoroastrian faith.

Later, in British colonial times the Parsis became more Westernized than the rest of the population and worked very closely with their colonial masters accumulating significant wealth, with which they contributed to the prosperity of Bombay in the late 19th century. However, in post-independence India they were looked upon with suspicion and their prominence declined, their influence shrank. In these circumstances after 1947, the prospect of another migration, this time from India to the West including North-America, became more attractive. This migration resulting in a second diaspora was not without its own traumas, either, as Parsi immigrants were often "lumped together with other Asian groups--specifically Indians" (Bharucha 1998: 24), who they wanted to distance themselves from.

As noted above, one of the major distinguishing features of the Parsis is their religious conviction known as Zoroastrianism. This is what Rohinton Mistry has to say about his relationship to this faith:

"I'm not a practising Parsee but the ceremonies are quite beautiful. As a child I observed [them] carefully in the same way as I did my homework, but it had no profound meaning for me. Zoroastrianism is about the opposition of good and evil. For the triumph of good, we have to make a choice. We can enlist on the side of good by prospering, making money and using our wealth to help others." (Lambert 2002)

In light of this, the industrious nature and the business sense of the Parsis described earlier gains new meaning: if you are a Parsi and accumulate wealth, which you then also use for charitable purposes, you are a good Zoroastrian obeying your faith.

Thus, it comes as no surprise in Mistry's short stories that quite a few events in them are related to Zoroastrian religious holidays and ceremonies such as Behram Roje (the Parsi new year) mentioned right in the second paragraph of the opening story entitled "Auspicious Occasion": all the unfolding events in it revolve around this holiday. Several of the stories also include dastoorjis or Parsi priests among the

characters; the fire temple or agyaari in Gujarati, is their place of worship, while doing kusti, where kusti is a rope of a number of strands that has to be tied and untied, means saying prayers in this manner. Wearing a sudra, a kind of tunic is also a crucial feature identifying a true Parsi as we learn in the last and most anthologized story called "Swimming Lessons", a story about the adaptation of a young Parsi man to his host country, Canada. His parents measure the distance, both geographical and spiritual, their son has travelled by talking about the probable changes in his new life in Canada, a place in the West where he is most unlikely to do his kusti and wear a sudra.

Canada is one of the countries where the second Parsi diaspora found a new home in the postcolonial era. Immigrants from South-Asia started arriving in Canada earlier, though: by the end of the first decade of the 20th century, there were about five thousand South-Asians in British Columbia, 90 percent of whom were of Sikh farming background from the Punjab in northern India attracted to Canada by employment opportunities. (Buchignani). Larger numbers of South-Asian immigrants came to Canada after the Second World War lured again by higher wages and then by the prospect of a better education in the 1960s. By 2011, the number of South-Asian immigrants in Canada had totalled around 1.5 million, with 10 % of all the new immigrants arriving from India that year. It is an extremely varied ethnic group, however; in the Metro Toronto area alone, "over 20 distinct ethnic groups can be identified within the larger (more than 850,000) South-Asian population" (Buchignani). It explains why some of these ethnic groups such as the Parsis find it especially important to distinguish themselves from the others also from India.

The significance of the greatly varied literature of the South-Asian diaspora in Canada has gradually increased since the 1980s with the emergence of writers such as Michael Ondaatje, Anita Rau Badami and Rohinton Mistry. Like these authors, Mistry's characters in *Tales from Firozsha Baag* were also born on the Indian subcontinent, outside Canada. The direction and purpose of the journey of those who decide to leave their homeland in the stories is not very specific. Very often, it is not specified at all if they want to go to America or Canada. Both are west of India with the same opportunities of higher standards of living, so it does not really matter if the destination is further north or south. In the age of global travel flying across the Atlantic presents immediate difficulties to them, or rather, their parents, mainly in financial terms as expressed by Kersi's father in the story "Of White Hairs and Cricket": "Somehow we'll get the money to send you. I'll find a way." (Mistry 1989: 112) The journey will take these young men and women from one city, Bombay, to another, either New York or Toronto.

The purpose of the journey is expressed in similarly vague terms such as in "One Sunday": "Vera had gone abroad for higher studies, following her sister Dolly's example." (Mistry 1989: 29) In the story entitled "Of White Hairs and Cricket", the father says the following to his son: "And one day, you must go, too, to America. No future here." (Mistry 1989: 112) Similar conversations take place in the family in "Lend Me Your Light", too: "We will miss him if he gets to go ... but for the sake of his own future, he must. There is

a lot of opportunity in Toronto." (Mistry 1989: 178)

What is common in the stories is that it is always the younger generation that leaves for a better life, for education, and they all take the same direction: west of India. After all, this is what the author Rohinton Mistry did when he went to Toronto in 1975, at the age of 23 and started to work in a bank first, then enrolled in a BA program in English and Philosophy at the University of Toronto. As Peter Morey summarizes it in his monograph about Mistry, in the 1960s and 1970s, emigration equated success in people's imagination in India (2004: 3).

As a result, when emigrating, Mistry's characters do not think much of how the natural environment will be different in Canada as they will not have to fight the elements of nature there, unlike the settlers in the previous centuries. They do not even see anything resembling a wilderness upon their arrival because it is an urban environment their planes take them to. When it comes to the weather or the climate (and the son, in his letter to his parents in India, describes his winter in Toronto in "Swimming Lessons"), we must agree with the parents that their son's description of the Canadian weather conditions only serves the purpose of hiding what is really important to him. As the father says, anybody can go to the local library in Bombay and "*read all about [weather conditions] in Toronto, there they get newspapers from all over the world*" (Mistry 1989: 232; italics in the original).

But when they finally receive their son's short story collection, which, in postmodern fashion, turns out to be the actual book we readers have in our hands, they start to get a sense of what the son has to cope with in the process of adaptation to the new country, which, indirectly, also explains the situation of Mistry himself. It is a real *mise-en-abyme* as we, like the parents, read about a writer writing his short stories about a writer writing his short stories. Fiction also turns into meta-fiction when the father provides different theories explaining to his wife how a writer relies on his memories in the act of creation "*changing some things, adding some, imagining some*" (Mistry 1989: 243; italics in the original), which unmistakably echoes Salman Rushdie's thoughts in his essay "Imaginary Homelands" about the possibility of ever knowing or being able to tell the whole truth (1992: 10).

An immigrant writer's crucial dilemma is expressed by the father as well when he comments on his son's story about Canada: "*if he continues writing about such things 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*" (Mistry 1989: 248; italics in the original). These comments relate to the immigrant identity in general as well, the degree to which it can or must remain unaltered resisting the influence of the mainstream culture.

The oscillation between the home culture and the host culture is approached in yet another way in the story "Swimming Lessons": the people the writer in the story meets in Canada and the places he visits there gain meaning only when they are interpreted in terms of his past experience in India. The old man in the lobby of the apartment building in Don Mills, which resembles the Baag, the Parsi compound in Bombay, turns out to be very similar to his grandfather. The attention he gives to this dying man is compensation for his sense of guilt felt over what he could not do for his grandfather in his last days.

The title "Swimming Lessons" is obviously linked with water imagery appearing in the descriptions of Chaupatty Beach in Bombay in the writer's childhood and in those of the swimming pool and the bathtub in Toronto in the present. He tries to counterbalance his failure to learn to swim in the sea in Bombay resulting from his aversion to the filth in it by attending swimming lessons in the pool in Toronto. No matter how much the location changes due to one city in the East being replaced by another in the West where swimming should be learnt indoors instead of outdoors, the failure is repeated.

The critics Ralph Crane and Radika Mohanram trace this resurfacing, in the new terrain, of the home left behind to Freud's analysis of the "uncanny" or the *unheimlich*. The unfamiliar/the unknown and the native/homelike are soon conflated because, as they quote Freud, the "uncanny in reality is nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated only through the process of repression". (2000: ix).

This is exactly what happens in "Swimming Lessons": in order to construct his new identity which accommodates--and is accommodated by--the West, the young writer-protagonist allows the familiar from his past in India to be reconstructed in memory and then in a narrative. Based on "The Location of Culture" by Homi Bhabha, incidentally a critic of Parsi background himself, Crane and Mohanram argue that "[t]he clear border between the home and the world, the outside and the inside, the public and the private dissolves, and each becomes a part of the other" (2000: x).

Therefore, what happens later in the bathtub when the young immigrant writer takes a deep breath and immerses himself in the water is that he overcomes the psychological barrier that caused his failure both on Chaupatty beach and in the swimming pool earlier. He gains new strength and a new vision, a new understanding as he says: "The world outside the water I have seen a lot of, it is now time to see what is inside" (Mistry 1989: 249). Finally, he is able to face his own predicament, which gives enough inner strength to him to decide to attend the spring session in the swimming pool, to take another chance to cope with the unknown outer world.

Similarly, the importance of vision, both physical and psychological, is highlighted by the title of an earlier story called "Lend Me Your Light". As the epigraph makes it clear, these words are taken from a poem by the Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore, but in the rest of the story the influence of European literary traditions, the poetry of T.S. Eliot among them, is just as prominent. For example, before his departure for Toronto, the protagonist thinks the following: "Half-jokingly, I saw myself as someone out of a Greek tragedy, guilty of the sin of hubris for seeking emigration out of the land of my birth, and paying the price in burnt-out eyes: I, Tiresias, blind and throbbing between two lives, the one in Bombay and the one to come in Toronto ..."
(Mistry 1989: 180) The Eliotian reference to Tiresias is especially apt: he is a mythical prophet bridging two different worlds just as Kersi, the narrator of Mistry's story, tries to. . Tiresias is also the one who can see with the mind's eye and later on in the story seeing and understanding will be crucial to Kersi as well.

To connect the familiar and the unfamiliar while in Toronto, he visits Little India, becomes a member of the Zoroastrian Society of Ontario and tries to find opportunities to socialize with people from Bombay. All these efforts, however, lead to disappointment due to being fake imitations of what has been left behind in India. However, upon his visit back home, what Kersi experiences confuses him the same way and raises questions as to the lucidity of his thoughts he was so sure of having developed by seeing his home from a distance. He must come to the painful realization that he does not yet belong to Canada, and he is not part of his country of birth any more, either. He admits in the last lines of the narrative: "I mused, I gave way to whimsy: I Tiresias, throbbing between two lives, humbled by the ambiguities and dichotomies confronting me ..." (Mistry 1989: 192).

The story entitled "Squatter" also poses the question of cultural adaptation in a painful but humorous tone gently ridiculing both the main character Sid/Sarosh and the Canadian multicultural policy of the time. Criticism of the latter as a ploy to cover discrimination is most obvious in the description of the Multicultural Department:

"The Multicultural Department is a Canadian invention. It is supposed to ensure that ethnic cultures are able to flourish, so that Canadian society will consist of a mosaic of cultures--that's their favourite word, mosaic--instead of one uniform mix, like the American melting pot. If you ask me, mosaic and melting pot are both nonsense, and ethnic is a polite way of saying bloody foreigner."
(Mistry 1989: 160)

The key concepts of multiculturalism are seen to have turned into clichés here and only hide a hypocritical attitude to newcomers in the country.

Sarosh, who changes his name to Sid in Canada as a sign of his conforming to the mainstream of the new

society only to rid himself of it when he returns to India, sets a time limit for himself to adapt to Canadian culture. When complete adaptation proves to be impossible, he travels back to the country of his birth as promised. On his way from Canada back to India, on the reverse journey, in the in-between space, what has proved to be unattainable for ten years is suddenly realized. But it is too late now and Sid cannot return to Canada where he remained alienated even at the end of his ten-year long sojourn, and it is equally impossible to find his old place in India because he himself has changed and India has become different as well.

These stories by Rohinton Mistry are full of ambiguities in their portrayal of the relationship between one's home country and host country. The characters who have experience of the cultures of both places remain doubtful as to the possibility of a successful adaptation to a new society, while remaining in India has its own frustrations and traumas and a return there is equally fraught with trials and tribulations.

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