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Diasporic Perception and Sense of Dislocation in Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance And Family Matters*

V. Sudhandra Devi ^{a1}, Dr. V. Srividhya ^b

^a Assistant Professor, Cauvery College for Women (Autonomous) & Part-time PhD Research scholar, National College, Tiruchirappalli – 620 018. Affiliated to Bharathidasan University

^b Assistant Professor (SS) & Research Supervisor, PG & Research Department of English National College (Autonomous), Tiruchirappalli - 620 001. Affiliated to Bharathidasan University

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Abstract

Diasporic Theory with its various features has influenced the literature of every language of the world. This literature is widely known as Expatriate or Diasporic Literature. It would be proper to examine features and aspects of such literature in which Indian Writing in English not only contributed greatly but also received International recognition and admiration in the past few years. Diasporic Literature is a very vast concept and an umbrella term that includes in it all those literary works written by the authors outside their native country, but these works are associated with native culture and background. In this wide context, all those writers can be regarded as Diasporic writers, who write outside their country but remained related to their homeland through their works. Diasporic Literature has its roots in the sense of loss and alienation, which emerged as a result of migration and expatriation.

Rohinton Mistry, the diasporic writer deals with migrant experience and his works depicts Parsi culture ethos, dilemma of migration, love for the homeland, hybridity and quest for identity. Mistry's deep concern for his parsi community in India and development of post-colonial India in general. Rohinton Mistry in his literary works tries to revision the history of his homeland and defines his ethnic identity and sense of self. The present paper deals with the writer's diasporic perception and sense of dislocation in Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance and Family Matters*.

Keywords: Identity, Loneliness, Parsi, Rootlessness, Struggle for survival, Marginalization.

1. Introduction

Rohinton Mistry is an important writer of the Indian Diaspora in the sense that he is well aware of the problems and issues of the post-colonial India. Born in Bombay in 1952, of Parsi origin, Mistry emigrated to Canada in 1975. He is a Zoroastrian Parsi with Iranian ancestry. Like Tiresias, he is also guilty of hubris as he also has migrated from the land of his birth. Like Tiresias, he is also shaking

¹ Corresponding author.

E-mail address: sudhandra1985@gmail.com

between two lives, that of Bombay and Toronto. Mistry's work is guided by this experience of double displacement.

Rohinton Mistry is a writer of Indian Diaspora, has published, within a span of ten years, only three works. His maiden anthology of short stories *Tales from Firozsha Baag* (1987) was followed by remarkable first novel *Such a Long Journey* (1991) which heralded his arrival as a gifted novelist. His latest novel *A Fine Balance* (1995) has received a worldwide acclaim, and is considered a landmark in the history of Indian fiction. No wonder, there has been a widespread growth of interest in his writings. The relation between literature and life seems the object of increased attention in his writings: his novels are closely linked with the social and political background. Like Nayantara Saghil, Salman Rushdie, Khushwant Singh and Shashi Tharoor, he is deeply involved with history. It is desirable therefore to analyze Mistry's fiction in terms of history, which helps us to see how it impacts on the nature and scope of his fictional style. One further discovers that history-fiction interface, practiced by Mistry, is fascinating and culturally significant. Mistry, as a powerful reciter of contemporary and social political life, shot into fame recently on being shortlisted for the prestigious Booker Prize for his novel *A Fine Balance*. In fact, the most remarkable feature of Mistry's fiction is that it brilliantly captures the crowded throbbing life of India.

Large in scope and vision, lively and evocative, *A Fine Balance* focuses on the lives of four unlikely people who come together in a modest flat in the city the day after the Government of India declares a state of internal Emergency. Consequently, these people's fates and circumstances become entwined.

Rohinton Mistry is an expatriate Indian-Parsi writer living in Canada. As a Parsi and then as an immigrant in Canada, he sees himself as a symbol of double displacement and this sense of displacement is a recurrent theme in his literary works. His historical situation involves construction of new identity in the nation to which he has migrated and a complex relationship with the political and cultural history of the nation, he has left behind. In his writings he often tries to revision the history of his homeland. Rohinton Mistry in his literary works tries to revision the history of his homeland and defines his ethnic identity and sense of self.

We know that the word 'diaspora,' which, going by its Greek roots, means 'to scatter,' was first applied in the context of the Jewish community, which was without a state of its own since ancient times. It was only in 1949 that the present state of Israel was carved out of the Arab territory. However, the term became popular and was used in the context of other nationalities also which has been displaced from original homelands due to one reason or the other. History is witness to the creation of different diasporas by colonial powers of the past. The phase of slavery routed in by them was responsible for the displacement of human beings from poor nations to other areas of the world under their control to work there as bonded labour on big farms and plantations. The present paper deals with the writer's diasporic cognizance and sense of displacement in *A Fine Balance*.

Mistry in his novel *A Fine Balance* gives a vivid picture of India during the colonial and postcolonial period, and it seems that geographical distance is cancelled out in the cartography of his mind. His migration to a foreign land, at certain level, is more a homecoming than an act of expatriation. The novel, like the literary works of other exiles, reflects his "obsessive concern with roots, nostalgia and finally a mythicization of a lost country." It provides another perspective of displacement. Vijay Misra asserts:

the idea of India exists in the minds of the diaspora through forms of spatial displacement in which the site is transformed into a world. This form of transformation of space means that India gets internalized and projected on to other geographical space without so much as a hint of dissonance. Where epic textuality requires a fixed point of reference, a past that cannot be duplicated but only extensively rememorated, what we get in the diaspora is a whole series of displacements that lead to the construction of new spaces as metaphors of India

In Mistry's novel, there are no traces of Canada and it explicates his nostalgic perspective of the political and social disorder underlying India's colonial and postcolonial experience. Rohinton Mistry has very sound knowledge of India's history. The endeavour to write a novel about one's native country on the basis of memory has been an irresistible challenge and a compelling necessity for a number of immigrant writers who have been cut off from their ethnic roots. Their backward glance at their native land conceals their desire for their lost home. In *A Fine Balance*, Mistry focuses on the history of his homeland, his community and family and reveals his diasporic cognizances very tactfully. He is authentic in his portrayal as he has distanced himself by emigrating to Canada and produces the effect of insider as well as outsider in every detail that is engraved in his memory.

A Fine Balance, set in Indira Gandhi's India and more specifically during the time of emergency, it is a stark and moving portrait of life during this period. It reflects the reality of India – the predatory politics of corruption, exploitation, violence and bloodshed. The novel also gives an insight into rural India illustrating the injustice, the cruelty and the horror of deprivation and portrays the trauma of India along communal, religious and linguistic lines.

Mistry's expatriate experiences make him think of his own native land from different angles. As a creative writer his expatriate experiences land him to compare India and Canada. He finds something very peculiar about his own country. This is how the history of India happens to be the basis of story in *A Fine Balance*. Like his earlier works, in *A Fine Balance*, the writer once again succeeds in recreating the Parsi ambience. The rich culture, customs and traditions of the marginalized Parsi community are foregrounded in the novel. Scenes describing the Parsi death rites and funeral ceremonies give the reader a glimpse into the Parsi world.

In this novel, Mistry blends history with the personal lives of the characteristic of an immigrant writer, while dealing with the lives of common people in India the novel deals with its socio-political cultural turmoil and four worlds are woven together in the fabric of the novel. The first is the middle class, urban world of Dina Dalal, pretty widow in her forties. Then, there is a glimpse into rural India provided by Ishvar Darji and his nephew Omprakash. There is another world symbolized by Maneck Kohlah, a sensitive Parsi boy.

Ishvar and Omprakash belong to the low caste of cobblers, who have to endure the atrocities of the so-called high-class people and their future prospects are very bleak. In order to enhance their plight, their family members, shift them into a more venerable profession of tailoring. With the professional shift, a spatial movement also takes place. They are symbolic of those myriad underprivileged Indians who, due to economic and social reason, are displaced from their familiar world. Even after they become fully-qualified tailors and return back to their village, they are deeply conscious of their own roots in the Indian society.

After their entire family is pitilessly murdered, pressured by joblessness and hunger, Ishvar and Omprakash decide to migrate to Bombay and become exiles by choice, like Rajaram who says, "thousands and thousands are coming to the city because of bad times in their native place. I came for the same reason." Although they are aware of the pain and disorientation involved in migration, they think that displacement would transpose their lives, it would be a liberating and positive experience for them; one of the ways of seeking freedom from the atrocities of the village lords. Their life in Bombay is contrary to their expectations and symbolizes the anguish, pain, anxiety and restlessness of people cut off from their native village. Like nomads, they move from Nawaz's awning to their slum dwelling, then to the railway platform, then to the entrance of a chemist's shop where they were mistaken for beggars, compelled to slog as labourers and finally released from the inviolable hell by the beggar master. The writer's description of their inability to adjust in an alien land after leaving their village and their failure to find a home, despite numerous efforts, is pathetic. They are caught in an inescapable dilemma, between two worlds- their native village which they abandoned because it held a bleak chance and Bombay which has failed them despite promises- and they stay on as marginal men, like the protagonist "*Lend Me Yours Light*," unable to discard the old and to find peace in new.

Dina, too, chooses to be displaced from her home, because she wants to assert her individuality and sense of self. She has grown up in Bombay but her sense of independence after her husband's accidental death keeps her away from her family. She resolves to restructure her life without being economically dependent on a man. For her, life is a series of emotional up-heavals and relocations of emotional bonds. Maneck too, is a victim of displacement. He is displaced from the protective environment of his home in the hills, to the college in the city, where he is constantly humiliated by his seniors. He endeavours to adapt himself to the political atmosphere of the college, but feels alienated. He becomes nostalgic and thinks of his home constantly.

So, in a sense, all the four characters are displaced, lonely and struggling for identity and survival in an alien world. Social circumstances, sense of isolation and rootlessness tie them together and make them forge a bond of understanding as they struggle to survive. Their miseries, their joys, their eating the same food, sense of adventure and all the time they spend together, makes them aware that life is often a fine balance between hope and despair. Dina Dalal's new family creates an idyllic space where different cultures mingle and people of different classes transgress sanctioned spaces in symbolic equations.

There are elements, though, which leaven the story and make it bearable, even enjoyable. The ever present humour with which Mistry tells it is one. Another comes from his male characters, who are so fully fleshed, so real, so human that it's impossible not to identify with them, as Mistry himself does.

For the most part he tells his story with a bare minimum of rhetorical flourishes, lyric passages, or brilliant fantasy such as routinely rendered by Atwood, Munro or Rushdie. Rich in sensuous vivid descriptions of its several locales, the novel weaves an intriguing narrative in which the intimate realm of people's lives is adjoining with the events that shape the course of history. Written with compassion, humour, and a profound insight into the artfulness of human nature. *A Fine Balance* confirms Rohinton Mistry's stature as one of the most important and talented fiction writers of today.

Rohinton Mistry's *Family Matters* revolves around the life of Nariman Vakeel, an aged Parsi, who is a retired Professor of English. He is living in an elegant apartment called Chateau Felicity with his two middle-aged step children Coomy and her brother Jal. When Nariman becomes bedridden, Coomy and Jal contrive a plan so as to send him to his daughter Roxana. She lives in Pleasant Villa with her husband Yezad Chenoy and their two children Murad and Jehangir. Already Yezad besieged by financial worries and he is being forced to take up the new responsibility of looking after his father-in-law. Rohinton Mistry lucidly depicts the sufferings of a man in his old age. For instance, Nariman is suffering from Parkinson and Osteoporosis. Even in Roxana's home too, Nariman finds no peace. There also at times, he is insulted by Yezad.

It may not be far from the truth to say that Nariman is the embodiment of Parsi community. At the young age Nariman wanted to get married with a non-Parsi girl Lucy. According to Parsi culture a Parsi boy should marry only a Parsi girl. So the same was the tragedy with Nariman, and his parents did not allow him to marry her. So, under compulsion he had to marry Yasmin, a Parsi widow. "Congratulations, Marzi Said Mr. Kotwal to his father." "After eleven years of battle you win!" 'Better late than never', said Mr. Burdy but fortune always favors the bold. Remember the fruits of patience are sweet and all's well that ends well" (FM, 11). He could not forget Lucy even in his old age. He leads discontented life until his death.

In *Family Matters* migration is an important theme. Parsis in India emigrate to foreign countries in search of money. Narendra Kumar attributes:

The parsees prefer the best since it offers unlimited scope for growth and prosperity. Dislocation is part of the parsee psyche. Exiled twelve hundred years ago, they came to India. Now they are migrating to west in search of greener pastures. Thus there is "double migration" in the case of parsees (14)

Being an emigrant, Rohinton Mistry lucidly exposes Yezad's dream of emigrating to Canada. Mistry gives autobiographical touches to his portrayal of Yezad. The striking similarity between himself and Yezad is clearly felt in the novel. In order to ensure materialistic security Mistry was migrated to Canada in pursuit of a career. He wanted to earn money and led a affluent living. Since Yezad is an autobiographical character, Mistry too experiences the sense of alienation like Yezad. He seems to wish to comeback to India, his homeland, to rejoin his community.

Yezad is eager to migrate to Canada for he wants “clean cities, plenty of water, trains with seats for everyone” (131). To Nariman, “emigration is an enormous mistake. The biggest anyone can make in their life. The loss of home leaves a whole that never fills” (240). Finally Yezad realizes his blunder and decides not to emigrate to Canada. He is firm to destroy the letters, forms and photocopies related to his intended emigration. When he is tearing the papers, Roxana comes in and asks what he is doing. He answers, “getting rid of garbage” (246). Roxana first tries to save the documents but then she understands, “Yezad was right, it was not worth keeping” (246). Mistry here seems to authenticate the fact ‘East or West Home is Best’.

The Parsis always feel that their community is declining gradually. The Parsi writers express their fear through their writing so as to caution their community about their dwindling population. In *Family Matters* too Mistry expresses his concern about the downfall of the community. Inspector Masalavala Jal, and Dr. Fitters discuss the future of the parsi community. They agree that the factors contributing to the downfall are “dwindling birthrate, or men and women marrying non-parsis, and the heavy migration to the west” (400). Inspector Masalavala expresses his fear thus “the experts in demographics are confident that fifty years hence, there will be no parsi left” (400). He also offers suggestions as to how parsi population could be increased. He says that parsi panchayats must prohibit parsi youth from going beyond a bachelor's degree. If they want to do post graduation, they have to sign a contract to have many children. He also finds fault with parsi boys and girls for the falling of birthrate.

Another instance of the Parsi hostility to alliance outside occurs when Yezad catches his son Murad kissing a non-parsi girl. He advises his son, “you can have any friends you like any race or religion, but for a serious relationship, for marriage the rules are different. Because we are a pure Persian race, a unique contribution to this planet and mixed marriage will destroy that” (469). Yezad is an ardent follower of parsi culture and rituals so that he didn't want to migrate and didn't allow his son to have a serious relationship with a non-parsi girl.

2. Conclusion

Family Matters is characterized by author's hard-to-be suppressed yearning to return home and reintegrate into the Parsi community in India. His autobiographical feel is more in this novel. Family Matters clearly portrays the anxieties, alienation and feelings of insecurity of modern day Parsis and Mistry's concern of the past and the present.

Mistry, in all his works, gives us a glimpse of Parsi Culture and faithfully captures its rhythm. He often fragments his narrative to include words and expressions from his native language which is typical of an expatriate writer. Straddling multiple cultures, texts and languages, his novels advocate an embrace of plurality and celebrate hybridity, intermingling, the transformation that comes of new and unexpected combinations of human beings, cultures and ideas and reveal his diasporic cognizance's.

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