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A Sigh for the Homeland: An Analysis of the Fictional world of Rohinton Mistry

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Together in the days behind,
I might but say, I hear a wind
Of memory murmuring the past.

- (XCII) Tennyson, In Memoriam (1850)

Abstract

Rohinton Mistry born and brought up in Bombay, as a member of Parsi religious community of Indian soil. Mistry is one of the eminent Indian Diaspora writers, now settled in Canada though he found India keep getting in his way of writings. Though Mistry migrated to Canada long ago in 1975 yet he kept on experiencing the similar fascination towards the homeland as other diaspora writers like Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh, Bharti Mukherjee, Vikram Seth and others have been realizing and became nostalgic with their words, penning their own versions of India in their fictions.

Keywords: Nostalgia, Diaspora, Emergency, Alienation, Displacement, Immigration

Nostalgic fiction takes a reader on a journey where the memory is engaged through sensory details and provides an escape from today's hectic pace. However, nostalgia is a very tempting and fascinating word of literary fiction; although this word "nostalgia" was not first coined in a literary world but in a medical treatise in 1688 by a Swiss physician and at first exclusively used to describe the physical symptoms of homesickness. Suggested alternatives at the time included "nosomanias" and "philopatridomania". As a seventeenth-century medical term, nostalgia was a disease, frequently conflated or confused with melancholia or hypochondria as well as with love sickness. Its victims included predominantly soldiers stationed abroad or servants from rural areas that had left their homes. The meaning of

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nostalgia as a disease and an emotion continued to fluctuate throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

In his *Lectures on Medical Jurisprudence*, delivered at the University of London 1837, for instance, A.T. Thomson described symptoms that were common to melancholia and nostalgia, but cautioned against confusing them. Testifying to the continued association of sickness with a superior sensibility, he moreover emphasised that “it is frequently, although not always, in the highest and most cultivated persons that [nostalgia] displays itself” (Thomson 883).

Nostalgia and a sense of loss define the experience of the Indian diaspora and their writings; though they have stepped into a far more complex jumble of existence yet they lured with their native soil. Home land always seems very fascinating and appealing to them to paint their imaginations and memories on paper. Indian Diasporic writers like Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh, Vikram Seth, Shashi Tharoor, Bharati Mukherjee, Jhumpa Lahiri, Hari Kunzru and Rohinton Mistry have all made their name and fame while residing abroad. As Rushdie defines:

It may be that writers in my position, exile or emigrants or expatriates, are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back, even at the risk of being mutated into pillars of salt. But if we do look back we must do so in the knowledge – which gives rise to profound uncertainties – that our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost, that we will in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, India of minds. (Rushdie 10)

Rohinton Mistry, the author of a few fantastic fictions about India, is one of the eminent writers of this wave of Indian Diaspora. He received the prestigious ‘Neustadt International Prize for Literature’ in 2012, which shows the significance of his writing in English literary world. His first book *Tales from Firozsha Baag*, a collection of 11 short stories, all set in the imaginary Parsi dominated apartment complex Firozsha Baag in his native Bombay (Now Mumbai). All stories narrating a sequence of events taking place over the space of several years in the 1960s, during which the main recurring protagonist, Kersi Boyce- who also turns out to be the narrator who assembles these stories and effectively writes the book called *Tales from Firozsha Baag* – it completes the circle of his life from youth to maturity; all these stories describe the fascinating and enact sometimes uncomfortable journey from innocence to adolescence, and youth to maturity, and later migration from Firozsha Baag to Canada. Therefore, Kersi’s narrations, somehow, seems identical with the journey of Mistry himself from Bombay to Canada. In later stories, Kersi’s description of sense of displacements and alienation in a foreign country; Canada, reflects the uniformity with the stipulation of Mistry,

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which may he experienced in Canada; this book is all about the first hand experiences and nostalgic narration of not of imaginary protagonist Kersi but of Mistry's himself.

The protagonists, Sarosh in '*Squatter*', Jamshed and Kersi in '*Lend Me Your Light*' and 'I' (consider as Kersi) narrator in '*Swimming Lessons*' are characters who have direct experiences of immigration; they are typical migrants drawn to the West for its prosperity and success. All of them also bear a resemblance to Mistry and their narrations somehow portray Mistry's experience of migration on various levels. If the comic tone pervades in '*Squatter*', the other two tales explore the psychological consequences of being a diaspora. Their attempts to balance the parent and the adopted cultures result in varying degree of success. Sarosh totally fails to adapt whereas Jamshed totally immerses himself in the adopted cultures; while Kersi is ambivalent in his responses, and uses the stories to reconstruct and understand his own experiences. Each and every story recites with a new sort of realization of boyhood to adolescence and youth to, as adulthood. Mistry himself quoted in '*Lend Me Your Light*' an epigram from one of Henry David Thoreau's letters, 'Not that the story need to be long, but it will take a long while to make it short'; Mistry had made a great labor to put every experience in a short nostalgic narration.

Mistry's first novel, *Such a Long Journey* deals with Parsi environment in India but this time Mistry portrays a larger canvas with the truths of lives of the middle class man. This story sets during the most chaotic times of 1971 in India, during which India and Pakistan went on war over the liberation of East Pakistan, or Bangladesh. This novel deals with the extremely detailed description of the everyday lives of Gustad, a bank clerk and his family in their apartment in Bombay and his nostalgia about the past, the happy carefree days of his childhood, the rich family background, the holidays and the smell of his father's carpentry business. With the narration, Mistry tries to portray the historical events during the war of 1971; thus he provides another nostalgic description of that chaotic time and its effects on common man's daily life; Mistry also recollects the political landscape of 1970s and the SBI scandal relating to Indira Gandhi and provides readers an opportunity to revisit the history of his version.

Mistry also provides the glimpse of his memories about another event related to the rise of Shiv Sena in Bombay, when Dinshawji told to Gustad about Indira Gandhi:

'Believe me' said Dinshawji, 'she [Indira Gandhi] is a shrewd woman.....always up to some mischief. Remember when her pappy [J. L. Nehru] was prime minister and he made her president of Congress Party? At once she began encouraging the demands for 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. (SLJ 38-39)

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Later, he discussed the consequences of this rise of Shiv Sena, when Gustad remarks: "... 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" (SLJ 55), and Mistry also discussed the threat of Shiv Sena to change the sign boards of shops into Marathi.

With all this nostalgic recreation of history, he touched the common human relations e.g. family, friendship, loyalty, patriotism, nobility, goodness etc. and its conflicts as a subject matter e.g. father-son (Gustad-Saurabh), friendship (Bilimoria-Gustad-Dinshawji), corruption (Political system), duties (Gustad- as a father, a friend, a bank clerk, an Indian) etc. but with all these harsh realities, he also tries hard to establish a sound faith in good as Plato quoted in his *Republic, Book VII* : my opinion is that in the world of knowledge the idea of good appears last of all, and it is seen only with an effort (Plato 179). Mistry's nostalgic moments provide readers a chance to revisit those meticulous events with him to understand and define the true sense of history and makes a new conception of truth about facts and life.

Mistry's second novel *A Fine Balance* also reveals Mistry's expanding field of vision, moving beyond Parsi life to embrace the fate of the wider Indian communities at the time of Indira Gandhi's infamous State of Emergency during 1975-77. It gives him a chance to pen an intense description of poverty and chaos during that period. Story revolves around the four main characters Dina, a Parsi woman, who refused to return to the home of her dominating brother after the death of her husband, and two tailors Omprakesh and Ishvar (uncle and nephew), two member of the lower caste (Dalit), whom forced to leave their village and surroundings just because being from the cast of shoe-makers (Chamaar) they practicing tailoring work which according to upper caste would not be their mode of working at any cost, and Maneck, the brooding Parsi young man, a college student, who is upset at the alienation from his family.

Once again, this book provides the readers a new wave of nostalgia of Mistry. This time Mistry coloured his story with bleak and harsh realities of the period of the State of Emergency in India, 1975; his version of the internal emergency expressed with his lines from the very book: "Living each day is to face one emergency or another" (AFB 571). Mistry also tries to recollect the atmosphere during that hard times with Ashraf's remark: "To listen to the things happening in our lifetime is like drinking venom- it poisons my peace. Every day I pray that this evil cloud over our country will lift, that justice will take care of these misguided people" (AFB 511). Mistry attacks what he sees as Indira Gandhi's fascism with the use of harsh realism in his story to show everyday brutal realism as the forefront of this *A Fine Balance*.

The second historical event after 1971 Indo-Pakistan war, the State of Emergency, has an overwhelming presence in the novel and devastating consequences for the existence of many characters of this novel. Ishvar and Omprakash are probably the ones who suffer the

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most. In the name of the so-called 'beautification' and 'Homes for the Homeless' programmes of Indira Gandhi, their shack in the 'jhopadpatti' is destroyed by bulldozers, they are not allowed to sleep in the railway station or on the pavement and they are taken by force to a work camp where conditions are almost unbearable for any human being; it also shows the illegal practice of bondage labors by government during that realm. In this context, the slogan of the government: "The nation is on the move!" (AFB 299) seems more than ironical because 'moving' must always define and demonstrate progress and advancement. In fact, opposite of this stands for destruction and homelessness. People lose their human dignity and basic rights which are offered to them by the Indian constitution. Ishvar and Omprakash are horribly mutilated by the enforced sterilizations and subsequent infection which causes Ishvar to lose his legs leaving him in the impossibility of practicing tailoring and thus earning his living. In this respect, Omprakash's remarks define the whole scenario: "You really thought they would help? said Om. 'Don't you understand? We are less than animals to them'" (AFB 529). The miseries did not stop here only, Ishvar and Om lose their good friend and mentor Ashraf who is beaten to death in the market place in the course of the irresponsible actions which characterized the State of Emergency. A man in the sterilization camp accurately summarizes the situation: "What to do, bhai, when educated people are behaving like savages. How do you talk to them? When the ones in power have lost their reason, there is no hope" (AFB 525); Not only the very poor and powerless people face the terror of the Emergency but middle and upper class also feel victimized; Maneck loses the only friend he had managed to make at college- the Students Union leader, Avinash, who is tortured to death by the police for speaking against government measures; his murder, is matched by the suicide of his three sisters after the Emergency, for their father had no money for their dowry. It is ironical that people lost their precious treasures, loved ones and hope to live during this State of Emergency.

The novel ends with the assassination of Indira Gandhi in 1984, in New Delhi where this city is being frenzied by flames and Sikhs are being tormented and massacred by the supporters of Indira Gandhi because they have lost their reason after the brutal death of their Mother Goddess; as narrated by a Sikh Taxi driver to Maneck: "Such terrible butchery for three days... They are pouring kerosene on Sikhs and setting them on fire. They catch men tear the hair from their faces or hack it with swords, then kill them. Whole families burnt to death in their homes" (AFB 572).

Mistry's third novel *Family Matters* discusses the inner world on the internal canvas, the beliefs and superstitious of Parsi community. Throughout the story Nariman, a 79 years old widower beset by Parkinson's disease, faces so many challenges of personal and family life; he shows that being a Parsi is in itself a challenge and remaining a Parsi is of another kind; for him Life was good, but never easy, though he is sanguine of life as he said to Jal: "the source of pleasure are many. Ditches, potholes, traffic cannot extinguish all the joy of

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life” (FM 3) but he also feels that the old age and adolescence was just as traumatic then as it is today; it made him nostalgic about his young days when he was forcefully separated from his Christian girlfriend by his parents and their well-wishers and forced to bend to the general demand of the community. This might be considered as a submission of his will to the higher good as Nargesh aunts persuade Nariman; “No happiness is more lasting than the happiness that you get from fulfilling your parents’ wishes” (FM 13) But Nariman accepts the separation from Lucy out of apathy and a sense of the futility of the imbalanced struggle: “They had been ground down by their families, exhausted by the strain of it” (FM 13). Nariman’s parents see education as the cause of sorrow: “Modern ideas have filled Nari’s head. He never learned to preserve that fine balance between tradition and moderns” (FM 15). This theme of coercion exercised by the family is repeated in a different context with Jal, Nariman’s stepson. In *Family Matters*, the question of the private space of individual identity is fully explored through the many instances of conflict between individual desires and duties towards the family or community. The foremost of these is the tragic story of Nariman Vakeel.

Though *Family Matters* is all about individual world but Mistry provides a closer look over the consequences of society on individual life when he draws the picture of corrupted system of Indian society, as Jal remarks: “Corruption is in the air we breathe. This nation specializes in turning honest people into crooks” (FM 31), and later he also memorises the bleak events of the destruction of the Babri Mosque: “The country has gone to the dogs and not well bred dogs either but pariahs” “May be the BJP and Shiv Sena coalition will improve the things” “said Jal ‘we should give them a chance” Yezad laughed “If a poisonous snake was in front of you, would you give it a chance? These two parties encouraged the Hindutva extremists to destroy the Babri Mosque” (FM 28-29), and brooding riots after this destruction with Husain’s nostalgia:

Sahab, in those riots the police were behaving like gangsters. In muslim mohallas they were shooting their guns at innocent people. Houses were burning; neighbours came out to through water. And the police? Firing bullets like target practice. These guardians of law were murdering everybody! And my poor wife and children ...I could not even recognize them... (FM 155)

With all these conversations between a middle class family in India about the corruption and irregularities in the Government shows Mistry’s grip over Indian political affairs. Mistry also portrays the aspect of immigration with his own nostalgic experience, as a wrong and painful decision, the protagonist Nariman during a conversation with his son in law Yezad, expresses his happiness on Yezad’s decision of not going to Canada. He says:

I am glad you did not” repeated Nariman “because I think immigration is an enormous mistake, the biggest any one can make in their life. The loss of house leaves a hole that never fills.” This father in law’s words brought a lump

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on his throat, reminding him to Mr. Kapoor's photographs of Jehangir Mansion and Hughes road his lost house. That feeling returned grief and emotions and a strange calm. (FM 220)

With all these Mistry's love for his native Bombay compels him to praise his homeland besides so many irregularities and haphazardness; as the real soul of his inner universe, he portrays his love for his city in Mr. Kapur's words:

...you see how we two are sitting here, sharing? That's how people have lived in Bombay. That's why Bombay has survived floods, disease, plague, water shortage, bursting drains and sewers, all the population pressures. In her heart there is room for everyone who want to make a home here. (FM 158-59)

Nostalgia is the recurring theme in Mistry's fiction. This nostalgia is generally for the past memories of life, embraced in the main characters. It is occasionally manifested in the idealization of religious rituals which are seen as a way to preserve the past and prevent the disintegration of the family and the community. As Mistry says about his fiction in an interview with Ali Lakhani:

Still I suppose it does work in that way. In a sense this novel perhaps will, when the Parsis have disappeared from the face of the earth, will preserve a record of how they lived, to some extent. (Rugh, 32)

Thus Mistry's fiction can also be considered as a testament of Parsi life; and his nostalgic approach as a testament of Diasporic writings within cultural identity, conflicted identities, multilingualism or rootlessness. As Dr. Annie John and Dr. T. N. Kolekar, in their *Indian Diaspora: A Journey Towards Self Realization*, define: 'This multi-faceted character of Indian writing in English has embraced sometime conflict of identity, conflict of cultural crisis and mostly the nostalgia of Indian belongingness.' The response to this belongingness and to their homeland can be both individual as well as collective; it is also possible that one may deny the homeland of one's origin and adopt the home of one's settlement as Naipaul considers himself as a British author, Bharati Mukherjee sees herself as an American author. Though they denied to their hyphenated-subjectivity but their powerful creative self, calls back to the country of their origin, their homeland. Bharati Mukherjee is the suitable paradox for this paradigm; she was born in India in 1940 and migrated to USA about 1962, she asserted that "New York is my home" but as Malashri Lal observes:

[M]ost of her literary material is substantively located in interpretations of Indianess...Mukherjee's long narratives, the Tiger's Daughter, Wife and Jasmine use Indian female protagonist: her successful prose emanates from sentiments about India, *Days and Nights in Calcutta, Management of Grief, An Invisible Woman*. (Lal, p. 298)

Asserting is one thing, but accepting the truth may be the hardest thing for any one and Mistry accepts this truth with elegance. His own view is more circumspect:

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Writers write best about what they know ...In the broad sense, as a processing of everything one hears or witnesses, all fiction is autobiographical – imagination ground through the mill of memory. It's impossible to separate the two ingredients. (Morey 4)

Rohinton Mistry, tries to locate the 'self' in a sense of Parsi in community and universe. Therefore, Nostalgia is the fuel that sustains memories and helps diasporas to create a hybrid literature that is representative of cross-cultural experiences. Hence, I believe there's a bit in all of us that are homesick for the good old days; so, no writing can be ever possible without any nostalgia, it reflects in every piece of fiction sometimes deliberately or innocently, and the fictions of Mistry are the ideal blend of this concept of writing in nostalgia.

Past will always win
A glory from its being far.

- (XXIV) Tennyson, In Memoriam (1850),

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