

Kersi's Transnational Identity: Displacement and In-Betweenness in Rohinton Mistry's "Swimming Lessons"

Dr. Arup Pal

Assistant Professor of English

Asutosh College

Kolkata, West Bengal

Abstract

This essay studies Rohinton Mistry's "Swimming Lessons" through the lens of transnational identity, displacement, and cultural in-betweenness. It argues that Kersi, the protagonist, embodies a condition of double diaspora, shaped both by the historical displacement of the Parsi community and by his migration from Bombay to Toronto. His experience is marked by a persistent negotiation between two nations (India and Canada), past and present, and home and exile, which destabilises fixed notions of national and cultural identity. Mistry, through memory, represents 'home' as an imaginative and fluid space rather than a stable geographical site. Drawing on Homi K. Bhabha's concepts of hybridity and the 'Third Space,' the paper argues that Kersi's in-betweenness enables the emergence of a transcultural identity developed through negotiation between multiple cultural affiliations. "Swimming Lessons" thus upholds transnational identity as hybrid, fluid, and perpetually intervened.

Keywords: displacement, diaspora, transnational identity, in-betweenness, third space

Both Homi K. Bhabha and Rohinton Mistry share some affinities, ranging from their origin, birth-place, upbringing, community, and exile; but, who followed whom is unclear. The former set out to study English at Oxford leaving Indian middle class "trajectory" (*The Location of Culture*, x) behind, while the latter left India in 1975 to get two BA degrees in English and Philosophy from the University of Toronto. But the duo, in their own ways, realized the estrangement, or what Bhabha humorously puts: "I went to Oxford to embellish the antique charms of the armoire; I ended up realizing how much I desired street food" (x).

While commenting on his original hometown Bombay (now Mumbai) in a recent interview, Rohinton Mistry retrospects:

This was part of a broader comment—that there was no question of accepting or rejecting the city because Bombay formed me and my imagination, and thus it was all I had. Not surprising, since I was born in Bombay and spent the first 23 years of my life there, those all-important, formative years. (*Sunday Times of India* 14)

Mistry's cultivated reply, when he was asked to comment on his self-proclaimed statement—"Bombay is all I have. All my inspiration is drawn from it" (14)—quite definitely highlights the original stature of immigrant authors—their personal state of displacement and longing for home. As a diasporic writer, Mistry's works negotiate between home and exile; with an adequate medium they endeavour to balance both of these conflicting poles. That diasporic authors often rely on their imaginative faculty is quite critically held by Amit Shankar Saha, who argues that diasporic writers often register their experience of homeland "in an elegiac tone rather than with nostalgia" (193). Saha reaffirms his argument by quoting Makarand Paranjape's view which corroborates the diasporic (Indian) writers' penchant for 'inexhaustible imaginative resources' (193) for raw material. Vijay Mishra's lucid yet profound argument peeps into such intricate aspects too:

Diasporas are people who would want to explore the meaning of the hyphen, but perhaps not press the hyphen too far for fear that this would lead to massive communal schizophrenia. They are precariously lodged within an episteme of real or imagined displacements, self-imposed sense of exile ("The Diasporic Imaginary and the Indian Diaspora," 1)

In "Swimming Lessons", the narrator's mother sympathizes with her son's alienation:

She said he must be so unhappy there, all his stories are about Bombay, he remembers every little thing about his childhood, he is thinking about it all the time even though he is ten thousand miles away, my poor son, I think he misses his home and us and everything he left behind (*Tales from Firozsha Baag*, 243)

Transnationalism refers to transborder relations of an individual or a group; the concept is closely associated with diasporic authors writing in alien lands away from 'home'. The idea of 'home' is central to diasporic writing. Nayar substantiates: "postcolonial diasporic literature can be read [...] as presenting as analepsis—looking backward at the past involves the extensive use of memories of the 'old' country, the point/place of origin and 'home'" (192). The complexity is not as simple as it may often appear. For Mistry, this trauma turns poignantly prominent because of his 'doubly-displaced' status. The perpetual entrapment accentuated by dislocation and rootlessness validates the sustenance of this genre. Needless to add, in Mistry's terrain, dislocation is resulted from migration (Ashroft 9). Since 'home' for diasporic authors is an imaginary locale—"a product of speculation and imagination" (192)—the one and only way to reach 'home' is possible through digging memory, which is no longer available. Therefore, the concept of 'home' is more imaginary than real. And then any fruitful attempt to reach 'home' is by memorising what is left behind.

Immediately after the publication, Mistry's debut collection of short stories *Tales from Firozsha Baag* (1987) touches the chord of his readers so much so that it never ceases to impress them, especially because of its vast array of intricate aspects such as the sense of entrapment, displacement, exile, memory, family relationship, ramifications of experience, eternal dichotomy

of soul, and “the redemptive power of storytelling” (Morey 27). Set in Toronto, an isolated cultural locale contrary to the warm, crowded Parsi community in Bombay, the concluding story “Swimming Lessons” of *Tales from Firozsha Baag* tries to build a passage between ‘here’ and ‘there’, ‘present’ and ‘past’, ‘old’ and ‘new’, India and Canada, and home and foreign land to answer his Indian-born Parsi-protagonist’s ‘double diasporic’ stance. The poignancy of his entrapment is doubled by the geographical displacement aided with socio-cultural one. Sudesh Mishra beautifully sums up this very dichotomy:

Mistry shifts his focus to the already fractured world of the mobile, newer-generation Parsis, who are sometimes twice-hyphenated (Parsi-Indian-Canadian) in their itinerancy. Mistry captures both the vanishing certainties of the Parsi community diasporised in India and the ambiguous, ambivalent lives of the Parsi individual diasporised in America and Canada. (327)

Mistry’s achievement in this story also lies in his ability to wave present and past, without privileging one over another. His choice is subtle and explorative, insistent and mannered, so as to materialize an “intricate tangle of cause and effect which directs events on both personal and national levels” (Morey 27). “Swimming Lessons” is dominated by two prominent metaphors: water and home. The concept of journey—both inward and outward—is conveyed throughout. And, above all, what solidifies the text is Mistry’s characteristic wry humor:

We [the Parsi community in India] are the chosen people where osteoporosis is concerned. And divorce. The Parsi community has the highest divorce rate in India. It also claims to be the most westernized community in India. Which is the result of the other? Confusion again, of cause and effect. (TFB 230)

However, underneath this placid humour, the story unveils an anonymous (although we are told that it is narrated by Kersi) and immigrant protagonist’s adjustment in a new cultural ambience and places him in a doubly displaced state, where the underling dichotomy between his symbolic home and real one critically questions his national identity. Through frequent reminiscences of his grown-up years in India, he tries to resolve his identity crisis with the aid of wistful memorization. In “Swimming Lessons” everyday chores of Kersi are interrupted by a third-person narration in which parental concern for their son is reported from Bombay. The story amalgamates the life of Don Mills and that of Firozsha Baag by redefining the concept of ‘home’, where “Canada and India come together to destabilize any notion of the stability, impermeability, or cultural homogeneity of national identity” (Gabriel 37).

All diaspora writers, more or less, strive for a hallucinated pursuit for ‘home’—an ‘ideal home’—which is no longer a constant physicality once they are displaced, to be more precise. As a result, diasporic identities are enveloped in such a position in which neither the original home nor the present land can offer them a permanent relief. In Mistry’s terrain, it is even more complicated. The Parsi community Mistry belongs to once migrated to Bombay from their

original land: “[i]n a sense, however, there is no ‘original’ homeland for the Parsis to return to—the historical Persia no longer exists” (Gabriel 28). Therefore, his Indian identity is already displaced. With his move to Toronto, Mistry’s life meets doubly-displaced stature. The idea ‘double diaspora’ stands for more than one homeland. If Kersi’s double diasporised belongingness, which this paper attempts to foreground, is one of the problematized corners of this discussion, the tactful outcome depends on the protagonist’s nature of intermingleness and transculturalism. ‘Home’ is not a homogeneous place for Kersi, an immigrant in Toronto; his failure to adjust the new country, new life-style is redoubled at his bafflement to return to old home. Because of his upbringing he cannot erase his Indianness, nor can he embrace a foreign city wholeheartedly. Temporal reminiscence is the only panacea at this tempest-tossed disjuncture:

The art of swimming had been trapped between the devil and the deep blue sea. The devil was money, always scarce, and kept the private swimming clubs out of reach; the deep blue sea of Chaupatty beach was grey and murky with garbage, too filthy to swim in. (TFB 234)

In fact, swimming is of vital importance in “Swimming Lessons”. Kersi’s desire to learn swimming in a nearby recreation centre in Toronto fails miserably; his failure to continue the lessons symbolises his inefficiency to resolve his disquiet both in water and in the new atmosphere. Meanwhile, we have come to know how the filth of Chaupatty beach in Bombay obstructed his swimming expedition. In both cases, Kersi fails to succumb himself wholly to any of these two national identities—India and Canada. Water imagery, in fact, is sustained throughout this tale and glides towards conclusion with a realization how ‘swimming’ penetrates transcultural relationship. Kersi’s bathtub epiphany clears his anxiety and gets transmuted into a fruitful consequence as he can now visualize “what is inside” (249). And his ability to experience ‘the world outside’ and ‘the world inside’ registers a diasporic sense of unsituatedness and foregrounds an identity bred out of transcultural unification.

Apparently “Swimming Lessons” parallels two tales simultaneously: Kersi’s troublesome endeavour to get accustomed to the life in an alien land is frequently replaced and complemented with the third person narration highlighting the parental concern for their son. The story bonds a subtle layer of pulsating lives and waves between Toronto and Bombay, where Kersi is trapped to battle with and emerge as a new soul. It is quite evident that this ambivalence and dichotomy of both culturally and geographically displaced protagonist resembles Mistry’s own hyphenation:

Mistry’s self-conscious positioning in diaspora and his affirmation of it as a space that emphasizes multiplicity and ambiguity bears important resonances with Homi Bhabha’s enunciation of a “third space,” that in-between space of hybridity where cultural change can be brought about through the “contamination” of established narratives and dominant points of view. (Gabriel 27)

Gabriel aptly finds that “the Canadian narrative already exists in conjunction with the Indian one” (37). Certainly it does, as Mistry empathizes the forthcoming trauma of Berthe’s son and husband and envisages that “the further they go, the more they’ll remember, they can take it from me” (TFB 247). By incessant recalling of Kersi’s boyhood and parental conversations in Bombay, the author tries to locate the blurring Parsi community in India in order to corroborate his protagonist’s Indianness, if it is possible: “[m]y hope is, Father said, that there will be some story based on his Canadian experience, that way we will know something about our son’s life there” (245). But, Kersi’s Parsi ethnicity appears as an impediment to unstable this national identity. His alienation is precipitated by his double diaspora, which breeds another sense of hyphenation—an eternal entrapment of in-betweenness. Kersi however tries to retain his Indian identity—“especially now with dual citizenship—despite the loss of a homeland” (Nayar 202).

The story delves deep into multiple identities under the reception of multiple cultures “rather than just ‘home’ and ‘alien land’ ” (201). Kersi’s veritable shift of mind from Toronto apartment to that of Parsi community of Bombay is resulted from this global reception. In “Swimming Lessons”, Mistry reveals Kersi’s transnational identity first by taking him out of the enclave of Parsi community and amalgamating him with other Indians, and secondly by constant switch over between Canada and India. Gabriel notes that this story catches a shift from a distinct and detached cultural system “with clearly demarcated boundaries, through a mixed cultural landscape, finally to arrive at a temporal and spatial terrain where the borders are so blurred that there can no longer be any stable or homogeneous conception of national space” (30). Bhabha’s supreme outlook upon “Border Lives” registers Kersi’s transnational soul:

We find ourselves in the moment of transit where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion. For there is a sense of disorientation, a disturbance of direction, in the ‘beyond’: an exploratory, restless movement caught so well in the French rendition of the words *au-delà*—here and there, on all sides, forth/da, hither and thither, back and forth. (*The Location of Culture*, 2)

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