Community History in Diasporic Fiction: Understanding Rohinton Mistry as a Community Historian

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Abstract

The very idea of diaspora evokes images of religio-cultural marginalization and identity crisis. The ones in diaspora try a wide range of strategies to tackle this issue. Their adjustment strategies, among others, also include turning to community solidarity as an anchoring against ontological insecurity caused by inter-cultural encounters. Some writers of the diaspora like Rohinton Mistry, M G Vassanji, Neil Bisoondath, Anita R Badami have also sought recourse to building community narratives to keep alive the distinctive community life. As a result, their narratives woven around individuals tend to turn into community sagas. The fictional worlds so created depict the diaspora communities almost as if they have been designed to be community histories. While other dimensions of diasporic experience have been researched, there is little academic work done towards seeing diasporic fiction as potential histories of specific communities. The paper is an attempt to fill this gap by analyzingRohinton Mistry's select fiction as a community narrative of the Parsis in its Indo-Canadian context.

Keywords : Acculturation; Community history; Cultural intersection; Diasporic fiction; Negotiating identities; Self – representation.

Some of the diasporic fiction is arguably designed to be a community's history. It is a record of what dis-location, re-location, and acculturation or adjusting to a different mode of existence entail—individually as well as collectively.Rohinton Mistry, along with M.G. Vassanji, Anita Rao Badami, Neil Bisoondath, and a host of other such writers of the diaspora, is at the fore-front of writers whose fiction shows a pre-occupation with community-consciousness. In Mistry's fictional world there is a pre-

ponderance of Parsi population. In fact, his concern for the community, particularly its interface with other communities, is so prominent that the fictional narratives appear to blend unobtrusively into the factual archive of the Parsi history. So, the questions to explore are: in what ways do fiction and factual accounts intertwine in thediasporic literary discourses?; and, for what specific reasons these writers, Mistry in particular, choose to be the community historians? Is this done by way of self-representation or for self-preservation? Or, is it born out of a sense of undue pride in one's own community?

In exploring all these things, this is an attempt to see Rohinton Mistry as a scribe of the Parsis in his early fiction and to see it as an alternative history from the Parsis' perspective. An attempt will also be made to see if this tendency among writers can be attributed to their having experienced multiple dis-locations. In Mistry's case, there exists a direct co-relation between his being twice removed from origins and his pre-occupation with his community's vicissitudes. Mistry, being a Parsi, can be seen as an inheritor of this legacy of dislocation. Arguably, it is precisely this positioning of Mistry and the collective journey of his community hither-to that set his fiction in a vantage position from which to build up a community narrative.

Even a cursory look at Mistry's writings so far (especially his early fiction) reveals two strongly asserted concerns: one, his almost obsessive concern with Bombay and the middle-class Parsis therein; two, his concern with the individual's predicament when faced with the turmoil of political upheavals and group activities. To account for the former, it seems reasonable to take a close look at how Parsis arrived in India and how they have fared since, despite the challenges that a shelter-seeking culture is bound to face.

Parsis are the Zoroastrians landing on the shores of India, fleeing persecution in their homeland of Persia (now Iran) over a millennium. With the Arabs having conquered Iran, and the Sassanide Empire (651 A.D.) having been pulled down, the Zoroastrians were faced with a choice between conversion to Islam and death. Frightened and helpless, they made a move towards India and were embraced and sheltered. As a result, today the community is found living in the north western Gujarat region of India- in Surat, Bombay, and Pune. To make space for themselves, they adopted a policy of religious tolerance, selective assimilation, and loyalty to their shelter-giving land. Afterwards, they went on to become known as Parsis or the people from 'Fars', the heart of the Persian Empire. They

began as farmers; then slowly took on trade and commerce during several Hindu rulers, and eventually thrived, or so it is claimed, after the advent of the British colonizers by adapting themselves to the ideals of an industrial society and colonial economy. Later still, their economic growth occurred disproportionately to their population (roughly 100,000 worldwide, 70,000 of whom reside in India, mainly in Bombay). Besides, their participation in the political life of India is quite evident. They also played a key role in the founding of Indian National Congress (Sven Hartman 1980).

The Parsis have thus been in India now for more than a millennium. And they have successfully integrated and assimilated with the Indian social milieu. If we measure up their contribution in concrete terms, there have been pioneering Parsi figures like DadabhaiNaoroji and Phirozshah Mehta in the field of politics; like Jamshedji Tata, and Godrej in industry, HomiBhabha in the sciences, Nani A. Palkhivala in Law and Zubin Mehta in Music (Sharma 32). Contrary to the popular belief that the Parsis were influential only during the British regime, John R. Hinnells and Alan Williams write:

> The Parsis of India are a community which can often only be described in terms of superlatives. They belong to one of the world's oldest religious traditions, and they are now India's smallest community, yet they are among those who have exercised the greatest influence on the Subcontinent, having been foremost in so many areas all out of proportion to their demographic size. (1)

Though extra-ordinarily industrious and talented, the community is also, fast moving towards becoming an endangered community, so to say. It is widely feared that they might simply cease to be. This note of alarm is explicitly sounded by Aditi Kapoor in her article "The Parsis: Fire on Ice" in *Times of India*: "Unless something is done to augment their fast depleting numbers and to revive their religion, the Parsis after an illustrious past could well just fade out in oblivion" (5). It is in this context that writers like Mistry can be said to be acting as community historians in their attempt to preserve their heritage, their whole way of being as a religious community.

The latter half of the 20th century has witnessed Parsisemerging as eminent Indian writers in English who avowedly assert a distinctively Parsi experience. The group includes names like BapsiSidhwa, FarrukhDhondy, Firdaus Kanga, Boman Desai, and Dina Mehta. Mistry has called their efforts

the "last grand stand" of Parsiwriters devoutly committed to the mission of 'group self-preservation'. On this point, A.K. Singh observes, "Their works [Parsi writers'] exhibit consciousness of their community in such a way that the community emerges as a protagonist from their works, though on the surface, these works deal with their human protagonists" (66). And in case of Mistry himself, it was all the more so as his migration to Canada had left him exposed to yet another foreign culture while "he was in diaspora even in India" ("When Old Tracks are Lost; Bharucha" 23).A similar view is taken by Jaydipsingh Dodiya also who observes:

> There are a few novelists like Rohinton Mistry whose works centralize their community. This is especially true of immigrant writers from the minority communities. For instance in M.G. Vassanji's novels *The Gunny Sack* and *No New Land*, it is the odyssey of his Khoja community in particularly and that of Asian community in general. . . . Their works exhibit consciousness of their community in a way that the community emerges as a protagonist relegating human protagonists to the background. (93)

Indeed, Mistry's pre-occupation with his past is palpable in his writings. Whatever he has written is obviously an aestheticized rendering of his memories of Bombay- his childhood experiences and his community in the Baag. The same point is emphasized by Nilufer E. Bharucha about Mistry's oeuvre as she observes, "In a broad sense, as a processing of everything one hears or witnesses, all fiction is autobiographical- imagination ground through the mill of memory. It is impossible to separate the two ingredients" (213).

Mistry started off with his collection of short stories titled *Tales From FirozshaBaag* in which he vividly depicts the life of middle-class Parsis in Bombay and their inter-connectedness with the fellow community people in Canada. The stories also assume a stance on the political issues like minority versus majority encounter in Bombay, its counter-part in Canada, infringement of the Parsi way of life by the local socio-cultural forces viz. the language, the cuisine, the economic activities, the socialpower equations and finally the sense of insecurity caused by the minority status.

The collection *Tales FromFirozshaBaag*contains stories depicting theParsi life as lived inFirozshaBaag, an apartment complex in Bombay. Collectively, these stories build up a cultural narrative of the community and even their ordering appears to be designed so as to conjure up a cultural album of the religious community living ensconced in the majority. The

opening story 'Auspicious Occasion' seems to offer a panoramic view of the Parsi religious routine. The reader is immediately introduced to the names of the daily practices and the objects used therein. In what manner and at what place they make prayers (Kusti, Fire-temple), which practices a devout Parsi is supposed to observe, which festivals the community celebrates (BehramRoje, NauRoje), the site and the method of their funeral rites (The towers of silence, vultures) and various other details have been provided in a seemingly effortless way to lull the reader into feeling that this whole way of being is no way different or unusual. However, the ease is deceptive and finely calibrated to slither the difference smoothly into the majority perception. This cultural-religious space is not sacrosanct, though. There are points of overlap and inter-mixing with other communities. It is precisely their interface with others that draws their contours. The neighboring Tar gully of Marathi Hindus is one such point. Besides this, there exist the Irani restaurant and the Cecil Cycles. Thus, it is no way a site of seclusion or exclusion. Rather, it affords a plurality of many kinds- be it that of ethnicity or religion or economic class. The fineness of observation and vividness of description are all deliberate as Mistry builds the community narrative brick by brick.

Of the eleven stories, almost all picture the Parsi way of life. On this point, Uma Parmeswaran, the Canadian writer of the diaspora, expressly notes,"The themes- of boyhood initiations, of everyday frustrations and of nostalgia- are universal but the details are essentially Indian, indeed essentially Parsi" (184). Moreover, the stories seem to build up an inverted image of the Bombay society in general as this fictional world shows the Parsis community in preponderance while the other communities are so in reality. The inversion signals Mistry's anxiety for the community being foregrounded vis-à-vis other groups so that, at least, the fictional world should not be tinged by that ever lurking fear of simply vanishing into non-existence. And this amply explains why writers like Mistry choose to be the community historians. In fact, they come to feel as if they are the Atlases of their communities' earths. A further proof of this deep-seated desire to stay connected with the roots can be seen in the narratology of his fiction too.

The narrative repertoire of the *Tales FromFirozshaBaag* is recognizably modelled on Eastern narrative traditions. It deploys the methods of story-within-story and the tell-tale asNarimanHansotia is turned into the "tribal spokesman and the repository of the community's heritage" (Malak 190). Nariman's stories are designed to socialize the community's children. However, the texture of the tales is so woven as not to spare even

the narrator, NarimanHansotia, who is shown as an anglophile prone to the Western influences: his fondness for English music (as he often whistles away jauntily some tunes of*Bridge on the River Kwai*); his sporting the moustache in the manner of Clark Gable; and, his snobbery about having a wide English vocabulary at his command. This characterization not only serves to portray the individual character of Hansotia but also to indicate the selective assimilation that the Parsis as a community had resorted to as far as the British culture was concerned. Some was borrowed, some was preserved from the past and thus there emerged a new identity that essentially remained typical. It was this tendency that E. Kulke described as the 'selective assimilation' of the Parsis (1974). But, Mistry seems to have used it to make another point too i.e. that pure identity is but a myth. Inter-mixing is just inevitable. The characters like the Marathi maid, Gajra, in the story 'Auspicious Occasion'; the Christian odd-job man, Francis in the story 'One Sunday'; and the Goan ayah,Jaykali, in the story 'The Ghost of FirozshaBaag' do all embody the presence of the 'other' in the cultural space of the Firozshachawl. This interface seems to have been created by design. One possible explanation could be Mistry's nagging awareness of the others as readers of his fiction, and their likely objections to the all exclusive Parsi life. Therefore, as if to pre-empt this charge, he seems to have made space of the inter-mixing of these closely located communities. The move may further be seen as hedge-work before he goes all out for the community.

On being questioned as to his commitment to his religious community, Mistry has outspokenly admitted his allegiance as he proclaimed to Geoffrey Hancock, in an interview, "My characters are outside Hindu India. And because of the history of the Zoroastrian religion, it does not provide a solid anchor like Hinduism or Judaism or Islam" (146). Therefore, his pride in being a Parsi and his commitment to the mission of preserving the Parsi way of life by recording it as vividly as possible in his fiction hardly call for any further debating. Nevertheless, his multiple dislocations did certainly place him in a vulnerable situation in Canada. But again, he taps onto this experience as well to register the plight of his community in Canada at large.

Though Mistry himself emigrated to Canada and chose to stay on, in his opinion the Canada-style of multiculturalism had failed to accommodate the historical and political heterogeneity. A poignant portrayal of it, if a bit funny, can be found in the story "Squatter". In a thoroughly comic vein, the story satirizes the immigrants' desperation to belong. A Parsi boy,Sarosh, leaves India for Canada on the self-inflicted condition that

if he fails to become 'completely Canadian in exactly ten years' (*Tales From FirozshaBaag* 155), he would return to India for good. It is he who is the squatter of the title 'Squatter'. In Canada, he manages to acculturate himself in almost every respect except that he fails to pass stool on a Western-style toilet seat. At first, it might sound grotesque that a writer should choose to write about somebody's inability to pass stool in a certain position on the toilet seat, but it strikes a serious note about the depth of cultural differences. It suggests how deeply an individual is rooted in his/her culture and how difficult it is to discard one's habits that come just naturally in a certain cultural set-up. For Sarosh it is a major determinant of the course that his life is likely to take. As the narrator says, "If he could not be westernized in all respects, he was nothing but a failure in this land- a failure not just in the washrooms of the nation but everywhere" (*Tales From FirozshaBaag* ,162).

Likewise, the tale 'Swimming Lessons' comes over as a model of negotiation between the cultural and national identities that may fit best in today's world order. The story is of a son and his parents. The son is in Canada, the parents in Bombay back home. Therefore, even the text is in two different font styles to indicate the two different positions from where it comes. The normal font style is that of the son narrating in the first-person point-of-view his life in Canada where his ethnic otherness is brought to the fore on every occasion available; the italicized one is that of the parents and represents their expectations, their dreams and fulfilment or frustration thereof. While their son's description of Bombay life makes them feel a little discontented, the final story wherein he portrays the life in Canada fills them with some contentment that eventually Kersi was able to adjust to life abroad.This merger of font styles can also be read as Mistry's attempt to show that cultures and nations are not entirely opaque.

There exist sites of inter-penetration and inter-mingling. Yet, in this state of in-betweenness, one needs the anchor of one's original identity that is often given by one's community. The fluidity of identity also needs some sort of over-arching mold of community to control the endless flow of signification. This is what his father perhaps means when he says "don't lose your essential difference" (248). So, Mistry in his fiction is ever awake to the trials the entire journey involves both individually and collectively. This story also points up the issue of being branded as 'outsiders' as Kersi notices at the pool where the white swimmers complain of there being 'Pakis' all around.

Yet another story is "Lend Me Your Light", and it is a much more straight-

forward treatment of the subject of one's community or group identity. Unlike 'Swimming Lessons' which address the same issue in a subtle and oblique way through metaphors, 'Lend Me Your Light' comes across as a simpler and more radical tackling of the theme. There are three locations viz. India, the USA, and Canada. Corresponding to it, there are three characters- Percy, Jamshed and Kersi- occupying the three locations respectively. The three characters seem to stand for three ways of dealing with the cultural difference. The phenomenon is noted by A. Heble:

> Jamshed, who, scornful of his native India, leaves for the Promised Land of America, and Percy, who adamantly stays in India to help villagers in their fight against exploitation, the story finds its focus in Kersi, the narrator, who comes to represent the struggle between the extreme positions. (57)

Jamshed is happily assimilated to the American milieu.As he is himself an upper-class young man, he does not seem to bother so much about cultural difference as he does about the class difference. In other words, as long as he does not have to fear the low-class people, he is comfortable and psychologically at ease in America. He condemns the *ghatis* with unusual indictment:

> In the particular version of reality we inherited, *ghatis* were always flooding places, they never just went there. *Ghatis* were flooding the banks, desecrating the sanctity of institutions, and taking up all the coveted jobs. *Ghatis* were even flooding the colleges and universities, a thing unheard of. Wherever you turned, the bloody *ghatis* were flooding the place. (176)

Kersi's dilemma is that he is caught between these extremes of cynicism and idealism and has a guilty conscience. He thinks to himself, "There you are my brother waging battles against corruption and evil, while I was watching sitcoms on my rented Granada TV" (184). To expiate the guilt, he also joins the Zoroastrian Society of Ontario but nothing changes. He remains suspended and continues to "inhabit the ambivalent space between cultures" (Heble 57).

Kersi's dilemma is equated with that of Tiresias of the classic Greek legend. As he begins to look upon himself as Tiresias and says,"I, Tiresias, blind and throbbing between two lives, the one in Bombay and the one to come in Toronto"(180). Later, it gets even worse and he bleakly admits defeat by meekly acknowledging his own helplessness, "I Tiresias, throb-

bing between two lives, humbled by the ambiguities and dichotomies confronting me" (192). So, this way Mistry subtly portrays the challenges faced by the Parsis vis-à-vis the idea of the Indian national space and the transnational spaces. He does so by intertwining individual lives with the communities' fates and therefrom situates them in the larger national space.

The novel *Such a Long Journey* depicts a long series of troubles that befall Gustad Noble, the protagonist. First his close friend major Billimoria, "who had been like a loving brother" (14) and almost as "second father to the children" (14), disappears mysteriously; then Sohrab refuses to join the IIT; then Roshan falls ill and does not seems to recover soon; then Gustad receives a dubious package from Billimoria and finds himself with a million rupees to be kept illegally; his friend Dinshawji too falls ill and eventually succumbs to death; TehmulLungraa too dies; the outer wall of the Khodadad building is destroyed by the municipal authorities in the bustle of protests. But, beneath the plethora of these problems besetting Gustad Noble, there is an ever- present concern with his "difference". And it seems quite justified to read this obsession as his way of staying connected to his 'original self'. In this context, it is pertinent here to quote Stuart Hall as he writes:

> . . . the relation that people of the world now have to their own past is, of course, part of the discovery of their own ethnicity. They need to honor the wider histories from which they come. They need to understand the languages which they have not been taught to speak. They need to understand and revalue the traditions and inheritances of cultural expression and creativity. And in that sense, the past is not only a position from which to speak, but it is also an absolutely necessary resource in what one has to say. There is no way, in my view, in which those elements of ethnicity that depend on understanding the past, understanding one's roots, can be without (238).

Along the same lines throughout the tale, Gustad is not even once shown remiss on his religious duty. And, as the novel is elaborately full of the ethnographic detailing, it is worth noting that religion, just like one's history and language, is an important indicatorof identity that Mistry highlights in the contestation of cultural space. On individual level, the past is of special relevance to Gustad. There are two episodes that assume especial significance: the incident of his father's bankruptcy and his childhood memory of the broken bowl at Matheran. He gives a sensory description

of his father's bankruptcy as he felt it aurally like "the sound of a deadly virus" (101),and in tactile sense as "cold as a chisel" (6). The bankruptcy meant a crashing down of all his dreams of a bright future through university education and other chances of being trained for a dignified job. Therefore, the metaphor of chisel suggests the tactile bang of the hammer of bankruptcy that left Gustad's future in pieces. As the narrative goes:

> . . . When his father's bookstore had been treacherously despoiled and ruined. The shock, the shame of it had made his mother ill. How swiftly moved the finger of poverty, soiling and contaminating! Soon afterwards, his mother had died. Sleep was no longer a happy thing for him, but a time when all anxieties intensified and anger grew- a strange, unfocussed anger- and helplessness; and he would wake up exhausted to curse the day that was dawning. (8)

Also, the incident of broken bowl at Matheran suggests Gustad's first encounter with the fragility and complexity of life. Both these incidents leave indelible imprints on his psyche. Now, whenever he is faced with a crisis, the two experiences come flooding back to his mind. These two events allegedly led to the loss of "the innocence of a happy child" for Gustad. For Williams these two incidents constitute the "original' loss in Gustad's life" (59). This loss at individual level can easily be extrapolated as the experience of the community when faced with forces that ruthlessly crush life and keep the minority helpless. The fineness with which these trials of the Parsi community have been registered in the novel is a synecdoche of Mistry's deep-lying anguish at being ill-treated and his resistance to the blind forces of the majority culture.

In the novel, Dinshawji is ever alert to the forces seeking to erode his identity. In response to Gustad's casual remark "What's in a name" (74), he argues:

> Names are so important. I grew up on Lamington Road. But it has disappeared; in its place is DadasahebBhandharkar Marg. My school was on Carnac Road. Now suddenly it's on LokmanyaTilak Marg. I live at Sleater Road. Soon that will also disappear. My whole life I have come to work at Flora Fountain. And one fine day the name changes. So what happens to the life I have lived? Was I living the wrong life, with all the wrong names? Will I get a second chance to live it all again with these new? Tell me what happens to my life. Rubbed out, just that? Tell me! (74)

Parallel to Gustad's personal predicament, there runs a concern with the community (embodied in Nagarwala case) as Nila Shah notes: "Mistry feels, this story 'waiting to be told' by the side historiographical account which might have been just peripheral or must have excluded it deliberately to please the centre of power, and centralizes it in his narrative" (99). She also observes, "Mistry's version of history has different dimensions. He focuses on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of what HomiBhabha calls 'cultural difference'"(100). Emphasizing the element of cultural distinctiveness in the novel, A.K. Singh has also opined:

> It seems that novelist constructs his/story of his community in the novel, which centralizes the Parsi community as a protagonist through its characters. And the country assumes centrality in the narratives of the various characters because the security and prosperity of the community depend on the country's fate. (201)

The fact of a community's future hinging on that of the country's at large has, thus, been brought out so vividly in the novel. This can also be interpreted as the diasporic writer's bid to re-claim an authentic past for a re-orientation towards future-- individually as well as collectively. Moreover, it assumes a significant dimension in the maelstrom of identity politics that host nations are often fraught with. Besides, it can reasonably be seen as a desperate attempt at self-preservation (especially so in Mistry's case) as constant up-rootings and continued floating existence inevitably throw such communities off their traditional moorings. It is in this scenario that the diasporic fiction can be viewed as an attempt at community history by writers who make it their mission, as Mistry has done, to record the way of life typical of their communities. And by doing this, they not only do a service to the community but also reinforce the role of writers as the voice of the suppressed, the marginalized, the dwarfed, and the disempowered.

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