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Rohinton Mistry's Diasporic Sensibility

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Writers who have moved away from one culture to another are caught between two cultures and are very often engaged either in a process of self-recovery through resort to history and memory or in a process of self-preservation through an act of transformation. They portray a world which is drawn from geographical and culture dislocation and project multicultural situations in an attempt to minimize polarisation and individual pulls of identity.

A sense of place is one of the imperatives of a writers being, an imperative increasingly being dislocated through extraterritoriality. Henry B. Wonham asserts that literary creativity depends on the "unconscious accumulation of local knowledge", and the writer has only one reservoir of unconscious material from which to draw (Wonham 9). Lopez in his remarks on " A Literature of Place" writes :
I want to talk about geography as a shaping force, not a subject. A specific and particular setting for human experience and endeavour is indeed central to the work of many nature writers, I would say a sense of place is also critical to the development of human identity. (7)

The ambience around, and the nature affect creative imagination as well as the sense of identity. A sense of place, the openness towards one's surroundings, these impart a sense of belonging and reduce the sense of being isolated. The expatriate movement from the culture of his origin to the culture of adoption and adjustment is a gradual and very slow process. Space and time are interrelated. History unfolds itself through constructions of space. Heterotopia, Foucault explained, is to be constructed with utopias. Heterotopia is a counter site like a resting place, a counter site where "all the other real sites that can be found within a culture are simultaneously is a counter site like a resting place, a counter site where "all the other real sites that can be found within a culture are simultaneously represented" (Foucault 24-25) Identity is constructed through myriad factors—language, myth, history, psychology, gender and race. It is directly related to the persons' self-image and the unconsciously inherited positionings.

Space provides in itself a dynamics for history. Diasporic writers are engaged in a process of reconstructing both national and personal histories with the aim of analysing and comprehending their own past and also as a historical intervention in the master narrative of the imperial races. Space is an important determinant of the kind of relationships which are produced. Power structures indicating exclusion and inclusion are spatial in nature. Soja contends, "The historical imagination is never completely spaceless and critical. Social historians have written and continue to write, some of the best geographies of the past" (Soja 14).

Rohinton Mistry has earned critical acclaim for his vivid description of Indian history and society. He has been favourably compared to such Indian writers as V.S. Naipaul and R.K. Narayan and has been recognised by Keith Garebian for providing a microcosm of Indian life but more particularly a microcosm of a highly defined Parsi sect that has managed to keep its own customs, language and religion intact while becoming a vital part of the Indian scene". At the same time, he gives a vivid glimpse of the multicultural India, the customs and traditions of different communities and India's past and present.
In *Tales from Firozsha Baag*, Mistry presents the vibrations of life in Firozsha Baag and his narrative strategy involves complex as well as interlinking them with characters who appear and reappear in more

than one story. These characters seen to be "locked in locating the stories within the building a cycle of restrictive traditions, economic needs, racial and religious tensions and inner psychological conflicts" (101).

The author leaves the reader with a sense of community and of life's bounty. Dextrously interwoven into these are fearful glints of the outside world :communal strife, dowry murders, colour prejudice. The definition of the setting and the concentration on a limited number of characters with whom the readers readily become familiar give the stories coherence in both tone and structure. In a subtle and unpretentious style, Mistry presents his characters and incidents with fidelity, the narrative retains a detached irony yet shows sympathetic affection for the characters as they encounter their daily concerns, petty worries and social and religious tensions. Despite near tragic circumstances, Mistry's characters survive and cherish hopes for better days. Following the models of psychological realism set by Chekhov and Joyce, Mistry reveals a knack for generating humour in the midst of tragedy. As he portrays the behaviour of individuals striving to retain their individual identity alongside the constricting edicts of a traditional community threatened by a hostilely changing world, Mistry Adroitly blends tragedy with irony, cynicism and humour, scepticism with belief: this angry portrait of the damaging vestiges of the caste system, "oozing the stench of bigotry" is compelling. This collection of independent but interrelated stories focuses on the process of introgression and assimilation into Canadian society by shuttling back and forth from an Indian past to a Canadian present: the complicated process of adjustment is the covert theme of each of the stories and the unifying theme of the collection.

In the migration stories in Tales from Firozsha Baag, Mistry, through a series of interlocking discursive formations, articulates the ambivalent space between the old culture of India and the new culture of Canada. Caught betwe[en] there and here, his characters and narrators, sometimes inspite of themselves are engaged in the activity of defining their own hybridity. Like them, Mistry himself is someone who—as a South-Asian-Canadian—negotiates between different cultural traditions, and his fiction powerfully attests to the need for the Canadian literary landscape to open up to include a new kind of critical activity. Mistry's stories depict the necessity of moving beyond a nationalist critical methodology—where "the desire to come to terms with oneself in place and time and in relation to others" is as David Tarras suggests, "a national instinct" (10) - to a cross-cultural exploration of the discourse of hybridity as it is played out both within and beyond our national borders.

What to some Western readers might seems to be an ingenious display of the exotic is really a credible picture of the teemingly bizarre in Bombay. Mistry's most outstanding feature is his accuracy with dialogue and speech, whether it is the abusive, hybrid cursing of Rustomji (“Have you no shame? Saala spat paan on my dugli and you think that is fun?"), the Mangalorean rhythms of the servant Jaakaylee ("O it pains in my shoulders, grinding this masala, but they will never buy the automatic machine. Very rich people, my bai-seth"), the sly, trickster slang of Eric D'Souza, the pervert at St. Zavier's Boy School ("C'mon man, what you scared for I'll flick. You just show me and go away."), or the kitsch-flecked archness of the narrator in "Swimming Lessons" ("The sea of Chaupatty was fated to endure the finales of life's every-day functions."). In short, "Mistry's is a tour de force first collection, on a higher order than V.S. Naipaul's first collection, Miguel Street." (Garebian 27).

Such a Long Journey again involves us with Bombay's Parsi community. In this novel the writer catches the unsettling effects on everyday life of the many upheavals affecting India in the 1960's and the 1970's sporadic riots, social unrest, border conflicts with China and a rapidly deteriorating situation with Pakistan, culminating in war. Seemingly his intention is to interweave in Graham Greene's fashion, the threads of the protagonists' personal life and his deepening, unwitting involvement in the espionage. In the

background, we can almost hear the strumming of the "Third Man theme". The novel traces in convincing detail the events leading up to the creation of Bangladesh and the details of Indian political life. However, the novel is more than a recapitulation of a particularly disheartening and violent moment in India's recent history as experienced by a kind of contemporary everyman. As in his stories, Mistry manages to convey a vivid picture of India—its corruption, the rampant bribery, dishonest and immoral politicians inflicting every stratum of society below. His sharp, affectionate sketches of Indian family life and of life in Bombay's crowded precincts are fascinating. And both in the sub-plot involving a simpleminded character and in his other portrayals, he as Ray asserts, "demonstrates a deft command of the kind of intensified, magic realism we are familiar with from the works of Gabriel Garcia Marquez" (13).

A Fine Balance, too is a saga that spans the momentous events of India's history from the turbulent times of the country's partition in 1947, through the horrors of the emergency in 1975, to the macabre aftermath of its prime minister's assassination in 1984. However, the novel is not a political one, it may be read as an effort at interweaving national history with the personal lives of the protagonists in a manner which is characteristic of a diasporic writer. India's pluralistic culture and languages, its extremes of rural and urban reality, parallels between the lives of individuals and the nation, multiplicity of voices and meanings and the repudiation of the possibilities of absolute truth are all subsumed in the complex image of the *leitmotif.* A Fine Balance in an expression of the predicament of self in the Indian urban/rural context. In spite of the stark life that it represents, the novel reveals an underlying moral purpose and a positive commitment to justice and humanitarian concerns. Mistry, as a diasporic writer, holds literary thought and literary language in a fine balance that is as much an act of "affiliation and establishment, as an act of disavowal, displacement, exclusion and cultural contestation" (Bhabha 5).

In Mistry's own words, voiced through the protagonist of *Family Matters*, "The loss of home leaves a hole that never fills," (246) is actually a recurrent theme of all his novels. Often he is questioned as to why all his stories revolve round a Parsi family and Bombay and not on the Indo-Canadians of tomorrow and Canada where he presently resides. What he voices through Mr. Kapur in this novel explains it all. "No matter where you go in the world... there is only one important story: of youth and loss and yearning for redemption. So we tell the same story over and over. Just the details are different" (221). Even a cursory glance at the title arrests our attention. Analysing the novel to be dwelling on the details of family matters is not really sufficient for an essential premise of life is that "it's a family that really matters", the very crucial pivot of human relationship. Mistry confirms this through a minor character, without family, nothing else matters, everything from top to bottom falls apart or descends into chaos. Answering to questions after reading portions from his novels he tried to speculate on the writing of a family saga and analysed it as an internal journey that probably is as profound as the external journey which he undertook in his previous two novels. He contends in an interview,

Family Matters I think has an internal canvas which is as complex as the external canvas... but there are concerns, primarily political ones....If you write about Bombay in the mid-90s, especially if you give yo^{ur} *characters a political consciousness, il is inevitable that they will sit and talk about what is happening in the city, what is appearing in the newspapers* (Mistry 43).

With an openness of thought he has woven stories through his direct relationship with people or maybe an acquaintance and thus they are real and honest representations. With the fragmentation of families, its the elderly who lose out the most. It is this issue that Mistry tackles in the novel. As in his earlier books, the milieu is Parsi. It includes the reality of the shrinking Parsi community and its internal debate on reforms and tradition. The author explores the characters of his protagonists with candour, exposing their oddities and frailties as well as their warmth and values, with a rare understanding. In this novel, too he makes use

of the native words, idioms and pronunciation. Even when describing their struggles with English pronunciation, especially wayward vowels ("Heep-heep-hooray!") he is quietly amused, never malicious. The literary works of Rohinton Mistry deal with the lives of Parsi community in India. On one hand, they open up a new world for the readers in Canada—the life and ways of the Parsi community and thus helps them in developing a better understanding and appreciation of their culture. On the other, they also present to us a model of multiculturalism in its delineation of this minority community in India and how well they have integrated into the Indian society without losing their cultural and religious identity. This can, Mistry proposes, act as a model for the Canadian society and will go a long way in strengthening the fabric of multiculturalism in Canada.

In its loving evocation of the details of the cultural milieu his works manifest a specificity and rootedness which are rare to be found in diasporic writing. They beautifully and faithfully render the life of the minority Parsi community —its religious beliefs, rituals, mores, social norms, modes of dress, food habits, linguistic habits and idioms etc. But amidst all these particularities which show their distinctiveness from other people, there is also emphasis on the universals of human experience. Even readers in Canada can identify themselves with these characters in spite of the different socio-cultural space they inhabit. If these characters appear different outwardly in their religious beliefs, social norms and mores, inwardly they have the same range of emotions and feelings - love, ecstasy, anger, helplessness and fears which ordinary human beings possess. In fact, showing universal in particular becomes Mistry's way of showing unity in diversity and thus presenting a paradigm of a stable multicultural society.

Mistry critical but committed stance towards his cultural roots provides, as in Joyce's writings, infinite inspirational material. They are cultural nuances in the works of Mistry. Language is a cultural construct and at times Mistry, disrupts his narrative to include words and expressions from his native language requiring the foreign reader to make an effort to understand. In his novels and stories he projects a world - an image of India - which rests on geographical and cultural dislocation. He reflects the pluralistic culture, diversity and the problems of the nation he has left behind and is engaged in the process of self - recovery through resort to history and memory and reconstructs both national and personal histories with the objectives of analysing and understanding his own past. His strength lies not merely in telling of stories which hold the reader's attention with loads of local colour and elements of nostalgia, typical of a diasporic writer, nor his elegant, unfussy prose. It is the portrayal of multicultural India, with all its traditions and cultures and diversity that is riveting. His literary works show brilliance and promise and have given a fresh and distinctive voice to Canadian literature. Rohinton Mistry, together with such writers as Michael Ondaatje, Joy Kogawa and Neil Bissoondath open exciting new vistas that expand the Canadian imagination beyond the familiar Anglo-European motifs towards Oriental and Third World dimensions. Mistry is a writer to read and welcome.

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