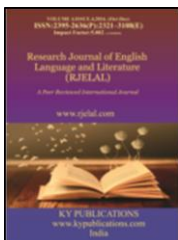




IMMIGRATION WITH PARSIS IN ROHINTON MISTRY'S *SWIMMING LESSONS* AND OTHER STORIES FROM *FIROZSHA BAAG*

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ABSTRACT

The Indian diaspora constitutes a unique force in Canadian Culture through the writings of the Indian authors who migrated to Canada in the beginning of the twentieth century. Rohinton Mistry is the only writer among the Indo-canadian writers, whose all novels have been shortlisted for "The Man-Booker Prize". As his novels depict the social, cultural and political life in India, his short-story collection *Swimming Lessons and other stories from Firozsha Baag* (1987) encompasses the social exploitation of the migrants by the native people within India and outside India. The present paper focuses on the alienation of in-migrants by the Parsis in India and the alienation of the Parsi migrants by the white people in Canada as highlighted by the author in the diasporic perspective.

Key words: diaspora, migration, Parsi, Bombay, Canada

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INTRODUCTION

The Indian diaspora constitutes a unique force in Canadian culture. Indo-Canadian literature encompasses the writings of the Canadians who trace their origins from India, migrating to Canada either directly from India or indirectly from British colonies such as East or South Africa, the Pacific Islands and the Carribean Islands. The Indo-Canadian community emerged in the beginning of the twentieth century, through the Sikh soldiers from Punjab who attended Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee Celebrations in 1897. They took the way of Canada to reach India during which they were ravished by the fertile lands and other natural sceneries. They tried their fortunes in the countries they visited and got employed as cops in the police force or night watchmen in some British firms. Thus, the Indian air started to spread in the soil of Canada including, intellectual and literary scene.

Indo-Canadian writers

The Indian diasporic writers absorbed the migration of the Indian population into new lands, thus contributing this diasporic feature to different walks of life in Canada. They have received international acclaim for their new themes and diverse techniques in their works. As their writings have made a rich and varied response or the experience of migration, diaspora is no more a painful experience in alienation. Some of the eminent writers of Indo-Canadian regime are Stephen Gill, Himani Bannerji, Lakshmi Gill, Surjeet Kalsey, Sunit Namjoshi, Uma Parameshwaran, Ajmer Rode, Balachandra Rajan Rana Bose, Rahul Varma, Neil Bissoondath, Bharathi Mukherjee, Nazreen Sathiq, M. G. Vassanji and Rohinton Mistry.

Life and works of the author

Rohinton Mistry writes most authentically in most of his works about his experience in India before emigrating to Canada. He was born in

Bombay on July 3, 1952 and migrated to Canada in 1975. He had his education in English and philosophy part-time and completed B.A. in 1982 at the University of Toronto for the short stories "One Sunday" and "Auspicious Occasion". His collection of short stories entitled *Tales from Firozsha Baag* was published by Penguin, Canada in 1987 and has reappeared in Great Britain and the United States under the new title *Swimming Lessons and other Stories from Firozsha Baag*. One book was short-listed for Canada's Governor General's Award and all his other novels received national recognition. His first novel, *Such a Long Journey* (1991) won Governor General's Award for Fiction, the Witt Smith's Books in Canada First Novel Award and was in the final list for Britain's Booker Prize. His other novels *A Fine Balance* (1995) and *Family Matters* (2002) also won various awards and all his novels were nominated for the Booker Prize and this had bestowed upon Rohinton Mistry the prestigious Common Wealth Writers Award.

The Parsi Life

The Parsi characters of Bombay or Zoroastrians of Bombay in India, their responses to their immigration to the west and the emigration within India are highlighted in *Swimming Lessons*. The Parsis abhor the poor immigrants into their city for they believe that the sheer number of immigrants would diminish Parsi presence in the city. The poor in-migrants are called "ghatis" by the Parsis. When these Parsis immigrate to the United States and Canada, they are called by the name "Pakis" by some "Caucasians". They are treated in the same manner as the Parsis treated the so-called "ghatis" of Bombay. The White North Americans consider the coming of the Parsis and other Indian immigrants as the racial corruption of the society. Mistry criticizes the use of the words "ghati" and "paki" by the host communities since he feels that such terms would dehumanize the people they represent. Mistry condemns the victimization of the immigrants by voicing out his concern and support for them. Mistry has examined the Parsis' life in his stories as they involve both emigration and immigration.

Status of the Parsis

In 1662, the Parsis who were the influential players during the British Raj and an entrenched community in Bombay, were invited by the British to move from their homeland, Gujarat to the city and at this time onwards, the Parsis identified with western culture. They also began to feel uncertain about their prospects in Bombay in particular and in India on the whole. In this context, the Parsi characters in *Swimming Lessons* struggle and protest to emphasize their relevance. The "ghatis" who are described to be one of the scheduled castes seem to be dominating the household jobs in Bombay (Aban Mehta, 1960).

The Parsis of Firozshah Baag

(a) Alienation of Bombay's South Indian immigrants

In *Swimming Lessons*, the residents of Tar Gully, a neighbouring area of Firozshah Baag, would be Maharashtrian in-immigrants. The Parsis of Firozshah Baag consider the inhabitants of Tar Gully as less refined. In the story "The Ghost of Firozshah Baag", Jacqueline makes a reference to Tar Gully that all Marathi people are in low class Tar Gully. Jacqueline, a Goan ayah, is called "Jaakaylee" by her Karani family members to whom she is working. She has been teased at the streets for her dark complexion for which she retorts that many people, like Tamils and Keralites come there with funny languages and different colours, and no people are accustomed to different colours. In "Auspicious Occasion", Rustomji mentions that Tar Gully has a "menacing mouth". The same phrase is used by Najamai in "One Sunday". Rustomji complains of being spit upon by a Tar Gully passenger while alighting the bus. Tehmina too accuses a Tar Gully's inhabitant of spitting upon her on her way to the Irani restaurant for ice. The pride of Rustomji is scratched when his white "dugli" is spoiled by the "paan" juice by Tar Gully in-migrant though done innocently. In spite of his realization that he is no superior to his fellow passengers financially, Rustomji lashes at them asking whether they think their action is fun. He calls them "ignorant barbarians".

(b) Ill-treatment of female maids and male servants

Throughout *Swimming Lessons*, male characters ill-treat female maids. In "The Ghost of Firozshah Baag", Jacqueline's mistress treats her roughly, forcing her to sleep on the floor. She is never given the key to the apartment though she is a trusted employee for nearly 49 years. She is made to grind masala only by her hand and not by a machine. The boys of the Baag tease Jacqueline for seeing a "bhoot" or ghost. Her name has been demeaned to "Jaackaylee". Maids, sweepers and other domestics face systemic problems of low pay, long working hours and all types of harassment (Savara & Everett, 1991). In "Auspicious Occasion", Rustomji mercilessly ogles his female servant or "gunga". In "One Sunday", Francis, an in-migrant and the handyman experiences horrible physical violence like Jacqueline. Before recruiting himself as a delivery boy by the furniture store near Firozsha Baag, Francis does odd jobs for the Baag's residents under the "awning" of the furniture store. He has been looked at always with suspicion by the inhabitants of Firozsha Baag. Tehmina is rude and bossy to Francis. She calls him an "idiot" and a "rascal" for no reason. But Francis endures all torments in a dignified way with a smile. As the jobs become scarce, he has to steal eighty rupees from Najamai to compensate his several cheap meals. But he is apprehended, severely beaten and handed over to the police for further torture. Mistry opines that the punishment does not fit his crime. Predicament of Francis and Jacqueline as an unemployed labourer and an ayah respectively pave way for their mistreatment and alienation.

Nemesis on the Parsis

In the "Swimming Lessons", Mistry's presentation of the plight of the Parsis takes a different turn when they immigrate to North America as outcastes. The immigration of Najamai's daughters, Vera and Dolly to Canada, Sarosh and Kersi to Toronto, Jamshed to New York, Jehangir in the United States shows themselves as the western hemisphere's version of Jacqueline and Francis. The superiority they harboured in India proves futile in North America. The phrase "ghati" christened by them to the in-migrants has its distorted form as

"Paki" on them by white North Americans. While in-migrants in Bombay are subject to alienation and violence, the immigrants, irrespective of their communities either Parsis or Indians in general, are treated in the same manner as the Parsis mistreat the poor and disenfranchised of Bombay. They become the butt of hate crimes. The Parsis, who hail a Parsi baby born with white skin denounce a baby with dark skin as "ayah's child", are considered dark-skinned persons in the west. When Sarosh uses a public restroom, he is bullied for his unconventional method of defecation. He feels the impact of xenophobia and hostility at that moment. Kersi is rebuked by white Canadian boys in his adult swimming class.

Conclusion

Rohinton Mistry, not only in his novels, but also in his short stories has faithfully pictured the consequences of migration to a different place either an alien country or a region in the native land. The Parsis who have marginalized the in-migrants within India undergo humiliation in the foreign soil when they take up the position of immigrants. Mistry's fidelity towards the mirroring of the real facts about Indian diaspora has thus stamped him as one of the greatest Indo-Canadian writers to be always in the vault of the literary world.

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