

REFUGEE, MIGRATION, DIASPORA

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Lecture39

Lecture 39: Elements of Double Diaspora in Mistry's Tales from Firozsha Baag

Thank you. Good morning and welcome back to the lecture series on Refugees, Migration, and Diaspora. Today, we will focus mainly on the double displacement in the life and fiction of Parsi writers, with our focus on writings by Rohinton Mistry. The word diaspora originally refers to the dispersal of Jews from the ancient kingdom of Judah after the Babylonian exile due to forced relocation. This phenomenon has a long history of mass migrations caused by ethnic and religious persecutions, including the Assyrians, Greeks (or Hellenes), and the Circassians.

INTRODUCTION

- The word **diaspora** originally refers to the dispersal of Jews from the ancient kingdom of Judah after the Babylonian exile due to forceful relocation. This phenomenon has a great history of mass migrations caused by ethnic and religious persecutions, including Assyrians, Greeks or Hellenes, and Circassians.
- However, from the 20th century, the word refers to a significant population of long-term expatriates from a particular ethnicity, region or nation. The academic discourse around these communities' lives and experiences has resulted in the emergence of a new discipline called diaspora studies.
- Indian diaspora forms the largest diaspora in the world, followed by the Mexican and Chinese diaspora. The feeling of displacement and alienation is constantly present in the dislocated individuals that can also be traced in the writings of diasporic writers, such as Bharti Mukherjee, Jhumpa Lahiri, Salman Rushdie, and Uma Parameswaran.



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built factories in Surat and other areas in the 17th century. Most of the Parsi population moved to English-run settlements to take up the new jobs offered by the British colonizers, by the British Raj. When the East India Company leased the seven islands of Bombay and transferred their headquarters from Surat, the Parsis also followed the British rulers. This set them in a prominent position of trust in government and public works.

However, this also resulted in the creation of their pro-British image among the Indian population. Within the Indian nationalistic space, the status of Parsis is marginalized, with a general perception that they are too urbane and somewhat pro-British. The expression of alienation and dislocation of the twice-displaced Parsi community can be found in the writings of popular writers from within the community, including Rohinton Mistry and Bapsi Sidhwa. While Mistry migrated to Canada from India, Bapsi Sidhwa migrated to the US from Pakistan. Rohinton Mistry is an Indo-Canadian author from the Parsi community who left India in 1975.

He is popular for his novels and short stories, such as *Tales from Firozsha Baag*, published in 1987; *Such a Long Journey*, released in 1991; and *Family Matters*, published in 2001. All these works provide an inside perspective of the Parsi community of India. His short story collection *Tales from Firozsha Baag* was first published by Penguin Canada and later republished under the new title *Swimming Lessons and Other Stories from Firozsha Baag* in the UK and the US. It received notable reviews from British and North American journals and was shortlisted for Canada's Governor General's Award. *Tales from Firozsha Baag* is a collection of 11 interwoven short stories, each of which can be read independently.

The stories share a unity of theme, tenor, and structure through the vital links between characters and events from one story to another. The primary setting is Firozsha Baag, a Parsi-dominated apartment complex in Mumbai, highlighting the ordeals, sufferings, particular characteristics, and mannerisms of the Bombay Parsis. Through the stories, Mistry informs the reader about the Parsis' day-to-day joys and sorrows, specifically in three stories: *Squatters*, *Lend Me Your Light*, and *Swimming Lessons*. All three stories particularly focus on the identity crisis and alienation of the Parsi community.

The last story, *Swimming Lessons*, is told from the first-person perspective of Kersi Boyce, who also happens to be the writer of the stories and appears to be Rohinton Mistry's alter ego. It concerns his mundane life in Canada and his admission to swimming

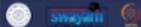
classes. So, the immigrant writings chiefly dwell on the notion of nostalgia and expatriate life, which causes in them a strong feeling of banishment. The title *Swimming Lessons* refers to this crisis of self-identity where an immigrant is not amply equipped to cope with the host society's surroundings, nor is knowledgeable enough about its geography and culture to be able to write a book about the immediate host society. So, this particular work *Swimming Lessons* indicates a rift in communication and thought and the swimming in the process of negotiating one's identity or status.

The author is almost swimming in the process of negotiating his identity and status. It is written referring to three different time frames, the contemporary Canadian reality or the host society's reality, and then the Indian milieu of the emergency period that is being revisited in retrospect, and finally, the third chronotope is that of the reader from which he or she is reading the story. So, three different time spaces kind of intersect and they kind of shape the meaning of the story. However, the story also represents the fragmentation between the Canadian present and an apparently disjointed Indian political past.

Identity Crisis

- The immigrant writings chiefly dwell on the notion of nostalgia and expatriate life, which causes in them a strong feeling of banishment.
- The title “Swimming Lessons” refers to this crisis of self-identity, where an immigrant is not amply equipped to cope with the host society’s surroundings, nor is knowledgeable enough about its geography and culture to write a book about it. It also indicates the rift in communication and thought, swimming in the process of negotiating one’s identity/status.
- It is written referring to three different time frames: the contemporary Canadian reality; in retrospect the Indian milieu of the Emergency period; and the chronotope of the reader from which s/he is reading the story. However, the story also represents a fragmentation between the Canadian present and an apparently disjointed Indian political past. It implies nostalgia and a sense of not belonging to the Canadian society.



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It implies nostalgia and the sense of not belonging to the Canadian society. The letters sent to parents form a bridge between the two time frames through describing the narrator's mundane life in Canada and his parents' lives in India, right? And the letters reflect the status of the Parsis as marginalized with a common suspicion that they are too suave, too pro-British. Even within India, they are already a marginalized minor community. Indian time space is described with respect to its political uprising scenario,

And there is a reference to the Maharashtrian society. Mistry vindicates his Indian belongingness by mentioning Dadabhai Naoroji, who was an active nationalist from the Parsi community and also a founding figure of the Indian National Congress. So that kind

of vindication, that kind of claim over Canadian society or that kind of justification to explain one's authentic citizenship vis-à-vis Canadian society is largely absent. So he has no story to tell about Canada other than its mundane life, and that too in a reporting style, which shows a kind of distant positioning—that even as he is physically a part of Canada, there is no organic connection or reflection about the Canadian mode of life. So this amounts to a conscious escapist attitude and a general apathy

on the part of the writer with respect to his Canadian belonging and his existence in Canada. Throughout the stories, the characters portray a constant flux between a sense of belonging and alienation. So, Kersi's parents in the story 'Lend Me Your Light' seem to have an inferior outlook about the nation, as is expressed through the following words. I quote, 'We have seen advertisements in newspapers from England where Canadian immigration is encouraging people to come to Canada.'

'Of course, they won't advertise in a country like India.' 'Who would want these bloody ghatis to come charging into their fine land?' At the same time, however, there is also a celebration of Mistry's Indian belongingness when his father urges him to mention some distinct Parsis of the nation who have made it big, such as Dadabhai Naoroji as an active nationalist, along with the contributions of the great Tatas and Sir Dinshaw Pettit, in the steel and textile industries, respectively. And this demonstrates the participation of Parsis in the social and national fabric in the process of nation-building, and this is something that makes the entire community.

In another story, namely Squatters, the protagonist Sarosh declares to his family and friends, I quote, 'If I do not become completely Canadian in exactly 10 years from the time I land there, then I will come back,' unquote. 10 years later, we find that Sarosh is completely westernized, except that he is unable to use the Western toilet. This inability to assimilate into Canadian culture causes a crisis of identity within him, which is expressed when he contemplates that 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. Right. Similarly, in Swimming Lessons, the chlorinated water in the swimming pool is a metaphor to explain the level of acceptance by the host society. The isolation occurs at a very close-to-skin level, where the narrator does not swim—cannot swim—in the same water because he has a different body, a different physique, and a different skin color. He's a visible minority, right?

That's a category recognized in Canada. The crisis of identity and a complete lapse of current temporal consciousness can also be understood from the constant relation of every incident, such as the old neighbor's illness, with his own grandfather. So, this constant relating and comparison of every incident with characters, happenings, and experiences back in one's own homeland shows that the belonging is elsewhere. The fact that the neighbor's illness reminds the narrator of his own grandfather shows that the psychic connection—the connection that the narrator makes—is with one's own homeland.

Identity Crisis

- The crisis of identity and a complete lapse of current temporal consciousness can also be understood from the constant relation of every incident, such as the old neighbour's illness, with his own grandfather.
- In the letters, all that the narrator has to say about his own experience is his gesture of socializing with the Whites and turning back into a cocoon after the encounter turns out to be immiscible.
- Ironically, the Canadian nation is constructed as a multicultural mosaic that is all-inclusive, but in practice, categorizations are made in terms of biologically palpable markers.



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Right. So in the letters, all that the narrator has to say about his own experience is his gesture of socializing with the whites and then turning back into a cocoon. Or rather, cocooning back after the encounter, because most of these encounters, most of these interfaces and exchanges, turn out to be immiscible. Through these encounters with the whites, it is increasingly revealed that the non-whites, the South Asian diaspora, are culturally, linguistically, and in terms of habits and practices, very different from the white population. Ironically, the Canadian nation is constructed as a multicultural mosaic that is all-inclusive.

However, in practice at the ground-zero level, the categorizations are made in terms of biologically palpable markers. This becomes observable in the story as the narrator faces a discriminatory attitude by three young boys in the swimming classes. I quote from the story. One of them holds his nose. The second begins to hum under his breath.

Paki, Paki, smell of curry. The third says to the first two, 'Pretty soon all the water is going to taste of curry.' Unquote. As his brown body is subjected as an object of gaze, his story turns away from contemporary Canada to focus on the notion of theorizing writing and, in the process, negotiating his own identity. So, the subtle kind of racism is

suggested in the story when the narrator adds that the swimming pool is a hangout of some racist group bent on eliminating all non-white swimmers.

to keep their waters pure, unquote. Within the Indian space, the position of the Parsis represented a Westernized pro-British culture, and they were viewed as practitioners of Anglicized Victorian values and culture, which evoked a certain degree of suspicion, especially because it could not fit into the post-independence Indian scenario. The homogenization of Parsis within a communal closure caused them to face ostracism in India, which heightened Rohinton Mistry's doubly displaced and doubly marginalized status in Canada. Critic and scholar Nilufer Bharucha writes about Mistry's diasporic status. I quote, 'As an Indian who now lives in and writes about Canada, Rohinton Mistry is a writer of the Indian diaspora.'

However, Mistry is also a Parsi Zoroastrian, and as a person whose ancestors were forced into exile by the Islamic conquest of Iran, he was in diaspora in India. Like other Parsi writers, his writing is informed by this experience of double displacement, unquote. So, to conclude, it is apparent that Mistry could speak of several radical issues concerning India, which includes the political situation and turmoils that were taking place in the Maharashtrian political landscape, and this would not have been possible had he been placed within India. So, that censorship is not working when he is writing. in diaspora, in Canadian diaspora.

Double Displacement

- Within the Indian space, the position of the Parsis represented a Westernized, pro-British culture, and they were viewed as practitioners of Anglicized Victorian culture that evoked suspicion, especially because it could not fit into the post-independence Indian scenario.
- The homogenization of Parsis within a communal closure caused them to face ostracism within India, which heightened Mistry's doubly displaced status in Canada.
- Nilufer Bharucha (2003) writes about Mistry's diasporic status that "as an Indian who now lives in and writes from Canada, Rohinton Mistry is a writer of Indian Diaspora. However, Mistry is also a Parsi Zoroastrian and as a person whose ancestors were forced into exile by the Islamic conquest of Iran, he was in diaspora in India. Like other Parsi writers, his writing is informed by this experience of double displacement."



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So, that censorship is not suppressing his writing when he is writing in diaspora. So, the migration stories in *Tales from Feroz Shaag* describe a series of interlocking or interrelated discursive formations by articulating the ambivalent space between the old culture of India and the new culture of Canada. The characters and narrators are stuck between there and here, displaying the negation of identity. They have moved to a new

land, but they are still aloof from finding a sense of belonging. So, this particular aloofness of the diaspora in Canada also reminds us of Shani Mootoo's short story, *Sushila's Bhakti*, where there is nothing

being told about the Canadian society. We get to know about the protagonist and her bhakti and there is a detailed discussion about her spirituality, her introspection, right? But outside of her home, outside of the precincts of her home, the Canadian society does not find any representation in the writing. Which goes on to say the same thing as we have discussed about a Mistry. There is hardly an interface, there is hardly any experience, any real experience happening at the societal level or any real connection with the host society, the Canadian society.

So *Sushila's Bhakti* is a story which is very similar to how mystery is writing. The fact that the Canadian society sitting where the writer writes all these stories is completely invisible. The Canadian society is hardly represented and discussed because it has left no impression, it has left no mark. on the migrant. The migrant is psychically connected, you know, the migrant is spiritually connected to the homeland and that's what he or she is representing through his or her creative opus, right?

So, and that's what he or she is representing through their writings. Similarly, we see Bapsi Sidhwa, who is a Parsi writer from Pakistan, also brings forth the double displacement and the baggage of alienation along with it through the protagonist's life in the US as it is represented in her fiction titled *The American Brat*. So, all these writings have a common theme of alienation, of having no real connection, no organic connection with the host society and the home societies, social affairs, political affairs, domestic affairs keep lingering and kind of leaking into their immediate time space. So, with this, we come to the end of our lecture today. Let us meet with another round of discussions and a new topic in our next lecture.



Thank you.