

From Bombay to Canada: Navigating through Rohinton Mistry's *Swimming Lessons*

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Abstract: Authors from diaspora backgrounds, like those from the Indian Parsi community, often explore common themes in their works based on their experiences of migration and relocation. They grapple with two conflicting emotions: the longing for their lost homeland and the adaptation to their new life. They live in a constant state of flux, blending their national identity with hybrid and hyphenated identities. Rohinton Mistry, a prominent Parsi author, skilfully captures the realities of migration in his writing. Despite the upheaval of relocation, Mistry vividly recalls his hometown and incorporates elements of his own life into his fiction. While he claims not to deliberately include autobiographical details, his early work "Tales from Firozshah Baag" demonstrates otherwise, particularly in the story "Swimming Lessons," where memory plays a significant role. This paper aims to examine how Mistry engages with diaspora issues, focusing on his use of memory in this story.

Keywords: Diaspora, Identity, culture, Memory, Indo-Canadian literature.

The term "Diaspora" has become widely used due to globalization and modern transportation, but its origins trace back to ancient Greece. In the Old Testament, it refers to the dispersion of Jews from Palestine, often seen as a punishment. This sense carries over to the New Testament. While the term now encompasses any minority living in another society, the original meaning remains relevant, signifying displacement and a longing for the lost homeland. Diaspora people live between two worlds, blending identities and feeling a constant tug between the past and present. They maintain connections to their native culture through various means, including religious practices, lifestyle, language, and memories. Memory serves as a link between their past and present lives, helping them create what Salman Rushdie calls "Imaginary Homelands." Diaspora authors reflect this in their writing, capturing the complex experiences of living between cultures. Writers, who are exiles or emigrants, often feel a deep sense of loss and a longing to reclaim something from the past. However, we understand that our physical distance from our homeland, in my case India, means we can't fully recapture what we've lost. Instead, we create imaginary versions of our homeland in our minds. These are not real places, but fictional ones – invisible homelands where we explore our memories and emotions about our native country. Indian diaspora authors pay close attention to depicting the experience of living between two worlds: the present where they reside, and the past in their homeland.

Parsi authors from India like Bapsi Sidhwa, Farrukh Dhondy, Rohinton Mistry, Firdaus Kanga, Dina Mehta, and Boman Desai often explore the complex relationship their community has with India. This stems from their ancestors' migration from Persia to India centuries ago, seeking refuge from religious persecution. The Parsis faced displacement and adjustment to a new land, which is a recurring theme in their literature. A famous Parsi epic called Qissa-i Sanjan recounts how Parsis settled in Gujarat after being welcomed by a Hindu king, highlighting the long history of migration and adaptation within the Parsi community in India. Rohinton Mistry, a writer born in Bombay (now Mumbai), moved to Canada later in life. His experiences of migration have given him a unique perspective on both his homeland and his adopted country.

He delves into the realities of diaspora life in his fiction, drawing from his own background. Despite living in Canada, Bombay remains a central theme in his writing. Mistry believes that writers are most effective when they write about what they know, and for him, Bombay is a rich source of material. He blends memories of Bombay with his new life in Canada, creating compelling stories that often reflect his own experiences and observations. In essence, Mistry's fiction carries an autobiographical flavor, as he processes his imagination through the lens of memory and personal history. Despite experiencing the turmoil of migration, Mistry has vividly depicted his hometown of Bombay in his writing, blending fiction with his own life experiences. His first notable work, "Tales from Firozshah Baag" (1987), is filled with such instances, although he denies intentionally adding autobiographical details. In one significant story from the collection, "Swimming Lessons," he effectively uses memories from his own life to enhance the narrative.

The term "diaspora" encompasses a diverse range of experiences, including diversity, change, and fluidity among migrants past and present. Memory plays a crucial role in diaspora literature, often recalling both traumatic events and nostalgic memories of a better past. For instance, the partition of India and Pakistan in 1947 and the subsequent formation of Bangladesh in 1971 led to mass displacement and trauma for Bengalis and Sikhs. Memory serves as both a healing agent for their psychological wounds and a reminder of their loss and alienation. Similarly, for migrants seeking a better life voluntarily, memory is bittersweet, evoking feelings of separation from their homeland yet providing satisfaction for their improved circumstances. Memory not only recalls personal experiences but also shapes one's sense of belonging to a community. Rohinton Mistry, representing the diaspora, explores the significance of memory in the lives of migrants through his writing.

In many parts of the story set in Canada, the protagonist looks back on his past, showing that his homeland still holds a strong emotional pull, despite its disappointments. Diaspora writers often have a unique perspective that allows them to critique their native country, particularly when they move from a developing country like India to a developed Western nation. Mistry's story focuses on highlighting both the positive and negative aspects of life in the Parsi community in India. By constantly reflecting on his homeland, he seeks to recreate it, a common preoccupation for immigrant writers trying to reconcile with leaving their homeland. Although Mistry doesn't explicitly express a desire to return to India, his constant criticism suggests a longing buried beneath his memories. Ultimately, the challenges he faces in his new country led him to rely on memories of his homeland to navigate his present experiences. The creative genius of Mistry has been backed up by his peculiar heritage of mixed identity. He is a postcolonial writer and yet has hailed from a minority community in India that supported the British rule in India during the colonial period and adopted the British culture and lifestyle to a great extent.

In diaspora literature, relying on memories is common, but authors often depict characters gradually embracing their new life abroad, diminishing the hold of memories over time. This transition is evident in Mistry's narrative, where lengthy reminiscences give way to brief mentions as the protagonist strives to fully embrace their new reality. Rather than being tied to one culture and country, the protagonist seeks to explore and integrate into the new culture.

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