

DIASPORIC CONSCIOUSNESS: ORIENTATION SYNDROME- A PARSEE PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

The very word 'diaspora' has travelled a lot, gained new meanings, significances and opened new vistas of knowledge and studies. The nature of diasporic displacements has changed considerably from forced to voluntary and the traumas and pain associated with the word diaspora has all cooled down. Communities and racial groups experiencing double diasporas are in a constant diasporic dilemma to accept, reject or to develop an attitude of ambivalence towards the host land. Parsees remember their expulsion from Iran after the Babylonian invasion, since then Parsees have settled abroad, first in India, then in the West. The first settlement in India was a refuge-cum-survival compulsion to save their religion and culture. The second displacement was voluntary; the urge to develop and prosper. Home is the centre of all diasporic studies. Diasporic consciousness proves to be the key to identity crisis, assimilation, cultural and ethical dilemmas, and nostalgia. The awareness of being different in terms of culture, complexion and nationality leads one to experience seclusion, nostalgia for the past time, lost home and consequently identity crisis. Parsees in India enjoyed a prestigious position during the British Raj. The end of British rule in India, the privatization of banks by Indira Gandhi shattered their dreams, and they came to realize that they need displacement for development and recognition. Rohinton Mistry ; an Indian writer of Parsee origin left India for Ontario, Canada in 1975, but all his works till date revolves round India, and the political and social issues, various paradigms of diaspora are delineated artistically. Diasporic consciousness in case of Parsees proves to be an orientation syndrome- "you will be in diaspora in all parts of the world." As home no longer exists for them (loss of original home), the concept of home has

lost original connotations for them. Rohinton Mistry creates Parsee characters, delineates Parsee rituals and customs, applies social realism and tries to secure the memory of his depleting community. Diaspora consciousness in Parsees leads to the awareness that there is no place like your home, apart from your home you will never be accepted completely, so be original, be unique, never shed the garb of your race, never leave *Kusti and Shudra*, remember good deeds, good thoughts and good action. All the works- *A Fine Balance*, *Such A Long Journey*, *Tales from Firozsha Baag*, portray Parsee characters and themes and the characters experience an illumination, an orientation which leads to solace and calmness. The present paper attempts to perceive the diasporic consciousness syndrome apparent in all the works of Rohinton Mistry which leads to a community concern and an orientation towards humanism.

Key Words- Diaspora, Nostalgia, Identity crisis, host land, home.

Diaspora consciousness comprises of two words derived from different disciplines of knowledge, yoked together to convey an awareness developed by an immigrant, when he/she experiences alienation, exile, homesickness and becomes nostalgic about home. Each word encompasses a plethora of meanings associated from the time of coinage to till date. Diaspora for instance holds the inherent pain of dispersal in case of the Jews, at the time of its coinage. Etymologically, it was a Greek word formed from “*die*” means to scatter and “*sperio*” meaning over, an agricultural metaphor which meant “scattering of the seeds”. It originated first in the Septuagint in a phrase- “*esc diaspora en pasais basilalas tes ges*”(New King James Version, Deut. 28.25) meaning- thou shalt be a dispersion in all the kingdoms of the earth. The word Diaspora with a capital D encompasses the Jewish painful experience of expulsion from Israel after the Babylonian invasion. Diaspora was first defined from the Jewish perspective including an inherent pain for leaving the homeland, a sense of loss, an aloofness from the roots of origin and a nostalgic look back towards home. Since then, diaspora has gained various meanings and has also opened new vistas of knowledge for interdisciplinary studies. Milton Esman propounds a classical definition of diaspora, diaspora means

“A minority ethnic group of migrant origin which maintains sentimental or material links with its land of origin, either because of social exclusion, internal cohesion or other geo-political factors. It is never assimilated into the host society, but in time develops a diasporic consciousness which carries out a collective sharing of space with others” (316). Esman believes that a diaspora group never adapts in the host society and develops a diasporic consciousness, when the immigrant faces discrimination and humiliation and he understands the cultural scenario of the host country, then diasporic consciousness is developed and he unites with the ethnic community (common origin).

Robin Cohen another anthropologist defines diaspora on the basis of some characteristics to be shared by the particular group. He sets some parameters as- “dispersal from an original centre, retaining a collective memory, vision or myth about their homeland, belief that they will not be accepted by the society and maintain ties with their homeland and idealizes it.”(6) Cohen also points out the reasons for displacements, classifies diasporas as victim, labor, imperial and cultural diaspora and speaks about the development of a strong ethnic group consciousness.

Consciousness on the other hand means awareness at a certain time. William James defines it as “the function of knowing” and by nature “it is fluid, selective and personal”(Bancroft,1998). It signifies awareness, an awakening from the past state of unconsciousness or ignorance. The development of consciousness is a psychological phenomenon. Consciousness is a dynamic procedure of mind. The brain theory confines consciousness to the head. Physics views it in relation to the perception of an object. Theosophy pronounces it as multi-dimensional and unified. The nature of consciousness is paradoxical and mysterious. Eldeman gives a simple and concise definition of consciousness; he says consciousness is the development of the natural ability of our mind to identify any object as red, blue, tall, tree or to generalize it. Brain is the reservoir of neurons where this process is performed. He further speaks about the primary and higher order consciousness. Primary consciousness is imagination and sensations i.e. awareness of things in the world. After the development of primary consciousness one moves towards the higher order consciousness and uses language to convey his thoughts and also develops self-awareness. Consciousness when yoked with diaspora constitutes an awareness of the differences in homeland and host land, of being an alien in an unknown place, to bear the humiliation of dark skin, to bear the pain of identity crisis within, to develop an ethnic anxiety, to understand the need to change and assimilate and to activate the memory, remember the home and be nostalgic. Diasporic consciousness is actually the psychic awareness of the immigrant who has left behind his home, his culture, his confidence, his religion and his potential. It also involves the knowledge of the self in relation to his culture, identity and status and this knowledge leads to inclusion or alienation. Diasporic consciousness supplies one with a concern for identity and these results in a pride over his/her ethnic background. A diasporic mind is filled with two cultures, two countries and he/she is engaged in a constant conflict either to accept the age old traditions or to adapt to the new world. Diasporic consciousness in the first generation leads to alienation, marginality, nostalgia, frustration on the other second generation Diasporas experience identity crisis, hybridity, language grievances and cultural dilemma. Clifford categorizes the diasporic experiences as negative and positive, he says identification of one’s common origin, common race, ethnicity, religion and culture constitutes positive diasporic consciousness and it generates a self confidence, a hope to survive, a home like feeling, and a sense of self respect among the members of that diaspora. The preconceived notions of the diaspora about the place of settlement, the experiences of discrimination and humiliation, as in the Swimming Lessons-when Kersi admits himself to the swimming classes, as he is going to enter into the water, the boys reacted - “one of them holds his nose. The second began to hum, under his breath: Paki, Paki smell like curry. The third says to the first two: pretty soon all the water’s going to taste of curry.”(TFB, 286), leads to the development of a negative diasporic consciousness, the racial abuse becomes unbearable, one becomes nostalgic about the homeland and here begins the identity crisis, the formation of a fractured identity (mentally absent and emotionally alienated).

Rohinton Mistry: a Parsee writer of Indian origin who left for Canada in 1975 writes consistently about India from the peripheries. Mistry’s writings have a double vision- temporary travel in the Canadian scenario and permanently located in India. His fiction is grounded in India, all his short stories and novels are set in Bombay. He himself confesses in an interview- “I am determined to write good literature...but to write well, I must write about what I know best.... I speak for my tribe” (Rushdie, 17). His works have a community concern. He uses

memory and imagination to make the scenes and characters alive. Mistry's writings are a commitment and responsibility towards the community. He is a doubly displaced diaspora, so he gets proper perspective to write freely and without any bias about his community and India. He frames intimate characters breathing in the familiar surroundings. A writer in diaspora always passes through a state of transition, to create amiable characters accepted by all and to create a real home like place and to satisfy his nostalgia.

Parsees are a prestigious community with a glorious past who were first displaced from Israel forcefully to save their belief. After their expulsion, they sought refuge in India, and enjoyed a prestigious position till the British rule, after the end of British rule, they were very uncomfortable with their English and Parsee identity, further they left India for better prospects in the West. In the West too, they are considered as South-Asians: a collective identity and are victims of humiliations at many public places. Mistry in an interview with Nariman Shaikh of Asia Source reveals- "The way you look, where you were born, these things are what will determine how you will be treated at airports"(Dutt, 2002) Displacement has proved futile for Parsees yet they are best at adaptation. The strict rules for prohibiting conversion and inter-caste marriages and the practice of late marriages have brought the community on the brink of extinction. Parsees are well aware of their fast depleting community. This fact has served the writers with a responsibility to write about their community and to create "imaginary homelands" (Rushdie, 2010). Mistry says- "when Parsees have disappeared from earth his writings will preserve a record of how they lived" (Lakhani.)

Diasporic consciousness in the case of an immigrant becomes an orientation syndrome. He asserts his self (identity communal as well as national) and assumes a solidarity and concern for the community. He joins the communal and native groups. He always search for the change, he needs to be to adapt there. If he is not successful then he experiences an identity crisis and if the hold of homeland is strong, he encounters a cultural dilemma. He is happy to be an American but he remains a devout Parsee. In this paper, I attempt to cite many example of diasporic consciousness where it acts as an orientation syndrome from the novels of Rohinton Mistry taking into account another Parsee writer Bapsi Sidhwa too.

Mistry literary corpus includes a short story collection *Tales from Firozsha Baag*,(1987) three novels- *Such A Long Journey*,(1991) *A Fine Balance*,(1995) *Family Matters*(2002) and a novella *The Scream*(2006). All the eleven stories in the collection deals about Parsee characters, themes, locale and culture. The very first story *Auspicious Occasion* describes a valuable occasion *Behram Roje*, and it presents the account of a Parsee mismatching couple- Rustom and Mehroo, preparing for the grand day. The humiliation faced by Rustomji after being spitted by a passenger and the taunting and teasing by the other passengers "Bawaji got *pan pichkari* right on his white dugli...." (TFFB, 20) makes him unhappy and he remembers the days when Parsees were next to the British. Other stories "One Sunday, *The Ghost of Firozsha Baag*, displays the Parsee rituals, and the inherent sense of superiority for being white-skinned and English education. *Condolence Visit* highlights the generous nature of Parsees; Minocher mirza's *pugree* after his death is gifted to a young Parsee by his wife Daulat. In *The collectors* – the Parsees sense of superiority is again pointed out. *Of White Hairs and Cricket* brings to the foreground the Parsee daily routine and rituals. In the next story *The Paying Guests*, the intimate Parsee world is brought to the front, the stage is overcrowded with the same Parsee characters, references are made to the Parsee newspaper *Jam-E-Jamshed*, *dustoorji*, *agyaari* and the Parsee rituals and way

of life. The language Mistry uses is also the language of the colonized tinged with all the paradigms of values and beliefs he practices. Language is the medium to propagate culture and values and Mistry always keeps this value of language in his mind and uses words from the Parsee and Indian cultures to provide the narrative an Indian hue and Parsee color.

The next story ‘*Squatter*’ is most important from the perspective of diaspora studies as it narrates the immigrant psychological dilemma to adapt in the host land. Mistry uses humor to subjugate the pain of humiliation, he explicates the experiences of a migrant through the story of Sid turned Sarosh who migrates to Canada, and adapts in all measures except the use of WC. The promise he made before emigration proves fatal, he couldn’t become Canadian in all measures. The alienation and humiliation he experiences on account of his inability to use the WC- “the world of washrooms is private and at the same time very public. The absence of the feet below the stall door, the smell of feces, the rustle of paper, glimpses caught through the narrow crack between stall door and jamb- all these added to one thing: a foreign presence in the stall, not doing things in the conventional way”(TFFB,188). This story presents the psychological aspect of emigration, the psychological alienation and ultimately the journey back home, resonances another aspect of diasporic consciousness. Robert Park a sociologist speaks-“Moral dichotomy and conflict is probably the characteristic of every immigrant during the period of transition when the old habits are being discarded and new ones are yet formed. It is inevitably a period of inner turmoil and intense self- consciousness.” (881-893). The guilt of emigration present in the heart of the writer finds expression in his characters and his works. *Lend Me Your Light* unravels the anguish, the guilt and nostalgia which become an integral part of the diaspora identity. Salman Rushdie says “A full migrant suffers traditionally, a triple disruption; he loses his place, he enters into an alien language, and he finds himself surrounded by beings whose social behavior and codes are unlike and sometimes even offensive to his own.”(277-278) The three characters in the story Kersi, Jamshed and Percy all depicts the various attitude of the Parsees towards emigration and India. Jamshed leaves for America and Kersi for Canada; Percy chooses to reside in India and works for the villagers. Jamshed has an inherent penchant for everything British, from the school days, he developed a sense of superiority, eating his lunch in his luxurious car, his behavior at the five star Taj hotel where he scolds the waiter and says- “ this was the only way to handle incompetence”(TFFB,224) all signifies a sense of superiority. After his settlement in America, his first visit to India annoyed him, and he wrote a letter to Kersi, he writes- “Bombay is horrible. Seems dirtier than ever, and that whole trip made me sick” (TFFB, 219). Kersi attempts everything to be nostalgic and to preserve his original identity; he became a member of the *Zoroastrian Society of Ontario*, visited Toronto’s Gerrard Street named *Little India*, but his efforts proved futile. The attitude of Jamshed and Kersi presents two different approaches of the Parsee diaspora towards the homeland, Jamshed’s attitude is one of straight forwardness and he condemns India for the unsanitable conditions and corruption, Kersi on the other hand after his visit to India feels guilty of leaving his homeland. He imagines himself as a “*Tiresias*; blind throbbing with two lives; one in Canada and other in Bombay” (TFFB, 233). The thoughts and doubts nurtured in his mind from his childhood, looms large inquisition in an alien land. All the objects, scenery, relations seem to be engulfed in an air of obliquity (darkness) when he leaves India for Toronto. Jamshed’s visit to India and his expected reaction- “Bombay seemed dirtier than ever, Nothing ever improves” (TFFB, 219) hurts Kersi. Jamshed’s inherent sense of superiority combined with his objective view point about Indian conditions makes him a

stark critic of Indian way of life and scenario as a whole. Kersi replies to Jamshed and talks about the *Little India* (TFFB, 220): the foreign version of India, where they can have everything Indian. Kersi had visited it once, but he was surprised to see the urge, the nostalgia, and the love for India, dried out in his mind. He salutes his brother Percy who works for a noble cause in Indian villages by helping the poor farmers with seeds and manure at cheap prices. Diaspora consciousness in the case of Jamshed has thrust him with a responsibility to see the change within, but his powerlessness in his attempt to change himself makes him a stark critic of Indian scenario as a whole. Kersi on the other hand was happy to visit India after his emigration, his journey abroad made his journey towards home special, his bag was full of gifts and his mind full of doubts and optimism with no proper reason. After landing of the plane, his mind now began to compare the situations and things around, as he got a perspective i.e. here and there. Toronto: lush, green everywhere, Bombay: brown, weary and unhappy. The optimism in his mind began to shrink and “all the doubt turned into convictions, he wanted to shout. It’s just not fair” (TFFB, 226). He saw Bombay unchanged as mentioned in Jamshed’s letter. Kersi learned to trim his expectations and reactions to things. Unexpectedly, he met Jamshed, but his outlook towards India was one of hatred and critical about silly things. The time came when Kersi has to leave for Toronto, but he could not relieve his mind of the thousands doubts and biases which has been nurtured back from childhood and strengthened after this tour. The epiphany remained unsolved. Mistry in this story presents the three facets of the diasporic consciousness. Jamshed’s powerlessness to subdue the inherent superior sense makes him a critic of his homeland, Percy straight forward in his love for his country serves the villagers and Kersi hangs like a pendulum in between love and jealousy, hatred and contempt. He wears the garb of ambivalent attitude and satisfies his inherent sense of superiority. Another story ‘*The Swimming Lessons*’ concentrates on the humiliating experiences, an immigrant faces and a symbolic nostalgia, he develops as a result of it. Water the symbol of regeneration from *Chaupati Beach* to the swimming pool to the bathroom tub, brings new frustrations and new developments expected from the immigrant. Diasporic consciousness turns his conviction into belief and he faces humiliation at the swimming pool. The failure to swim in India as well as Canada connotes the failure to adapt in India as well as Canada. The second string of story is Mistry’s own story in which he describes the art of story writing and clears the doubt that he writes about India not because of nostalgia, but he is far enough to secure an objective and artistic distance to keep his likes and biases apart, and to describe all the reality. He has developed himself from a home-centered writer to an international writer and a Parsee writer, describing his fast depleting Parsee community in all its humor, eccentricities and greatness. ‘*Such A Long Journey*’, the very first novel signifies the long journey of the Parsees and describes the mental situation of Gustad; a devout Parsee, who on account of diasporic consciousness seeks the orientation that “No future for minorities, with these fascist *Shiv Sena* politics and Marathi language nonsense. It was going to be like black people in America.”(SALJ, 55) So he wants his son Sohrab to take admission in IIT, but his son’s refusal torments him. The personal agony, mixed with the torture of Major Bilimora(Parsee), the future of Parsees, the unfavorable political scenario, gave birth to a conflict within. Gustad remained a devout Parsee, maintaining the *Kusti* and *Shudra*, believing *manashni*, *gavashni*, and *kunashni* (good thoughts, good words and good deeds) and this orientation towards the Parsee rituals made him succeed last. He remained true to his ideals and succeeded at last. The Indian multi cultural scenario represented by the sacred wall of miracles is

demolished by the politicians. The comment of the pavement artist who made that wall a miracle by painting various deities of different religion, rightly laughs the idea of permanence for immigrant. “Where road side latrine becomes temples and shrines and temples and shrines are demolished to dust and ruin, does it matter where” (SALJ, 338). Mistry’s next novel ‘*A Fine Balance*’ posits different facets of displacement, and diasporic consciousness leads to orientation and disorientation. Ishvar and Om; the denizens of village are forced to move to city to overcome the threat of death by the landlord Dharamsi. Maneck Kolah; a Parsee teenager from the mountains willingly comes Bombay for better future prospects. Dina Dalal another Parsee lady who displaces herself voluntarily to be self dependent. Bombay became the confluence of all the various threads of displacement and diasporic consciousness orientates each and every one differently, Ishvar and Om: Cobblers (*chamar*) by caste, becomes tailors, Maneck Kohlah’s further movement to Dubai changed him and he couldn’t bear the changes and couldn’t understand the nature of these changes and in a mood of mystery and sorrow, he commits suicide, Dina Dalal: who after the death of her husband leaves her brother Nuswan and lives independently, but the political scenario affected all the characters personally and it leads to disorientation in her case and she returns back to her brother’s house. Every one achieves a fine balance suiting his approach and attitude. ‘*Family Matters*’ is again about Bombay with all its treacheries, all the unhappiness, the dirt, the filth, the *Shiv Sena* political motives etc. Nariman Vakeel: a Parsee old man, Parkinson ridden, victim of the Parsee irrational customs and rituals lives with his step children Jal and Coomy from his first marriage. Roxana his own daughter from his second wife is married to Yezad. Coomy considers Nariman as the cause of her mother’s distress and death, she dislikes him. Apart from the familial drama the novel also encompasses the Post- *Babri* mosque demolition riots, the approach of the fundamentalist and the sufferings of minorities. Mr Kapur: Yezad’s employer is killed by *Shiv Senas* fundamentalist *Hindutva* ideology. Nariman becomes the victim of his community traditions and strict patriarchal tyranny. The only characters who observes a transformation is Yezad, who becomes a devout Parsee, it is Mistry’s belief in the rituals and religion (Parsee) which is revealed through the character of Yezad. Diasporic consciousness here acts as an alarm to change and stick to the original (inherent) culture, rituals and traditions. Mistry also delineates the effect of Parsee community being becoming a minority after Indian independence and the strengthening of the right wing parties. He also expresses the subaltern perspective from the point of view of Muslims and Parsees, the worst thing happens when even a Hindu Mr. Kapoor is murdered by *Shiv Sena* activists. In case of Nariman, the distance in time, makes him nostalgic. Yezad suffers on account of his inability to bear the economic burden of his family, he always dreams of going to West. He also smells the hatred, jealousy and humility in various acts of the fundamentalists. At last, he achieves an epiphany which Kersi attempts to experience during his visit to India.

Thus, it can be concluded from the above description that Mistry possesses multiple identities- Parsee, Indian, South-Asian, Immigrant and Canadian, but being a Parsee writer, and in double diaspora, he has a responsibility towards his community and he crowds his novels with Parsee characters, habitats, rituals and culture. The inherent sense of superiority remains intact in his works. Diaspora consciousness leads to the realization of the pride of being a Parsee: the disciple of *Zarathustra*. It is better to remain an intimate Parsee and to write with a Parsee perspective in the mind. Apart from Mistry writers like- Bapsi Sidhwa, Boman Desai, Dina Mehta, Farukh Dondhy etc also keeps their dwindling community in mind, but Mistry and

Sidhwa are renowned Parsee novelists encompassing a wide and varied range of themes and issues in their novels. Bapsi sidhwa's novels are an amalgam of Parsee as well as feminine perspective. Diasporic consciousness leads to orientation towards community concerns especially in the Parsee novels. Mistry thinks and feels for his fast depleting community and his one after another works are overcrowded with Parsee characters and locale along with the routine culture and customs. Mistry holds the key to survival, slight adjustment, which in case of Parsees is very easy and natural. Parsees English education and their proximity to British during the Raj, enable them to adapt easily. Parsee immigrants are twice displaced from their first home, secondly they belong to the fast depleting minority community, the end of British rule brought them to the peripheries, and this develops an ethnic anxiety among the members. Mistry is not an exception, he writes mainly and chiefly about his community, his stories and themes are Parsee-oriented, *Kusti* and *Shudra*, *Ahura Mazda*, *Zarathustra*, *Fire temple* and *Gathas* always find a renowned position in his works. Parsees are truly 'un homed' in the sense that they are neither at home in India nor abroad, they only create 'Imaginary Homeland' and diasporic consciousness activates the memory and one remembers the incidents, the people, and the locale exactly. Parsee writers like other diaspora writers "deal in broken mirrors some of whose fragment have been lost" (imaginary homelands). Mistry's works serve as a 'last witness' he himself says my works will 'preserve a record of how Parsees lived" (Lakhani). The identity which Parsees try to shed away is thrust upon them in the West, this leads to an identity crisis and a dilemma towards adaptation. Identity crisis in the case of Parsees has led to multiple accommodations. Parsees embrace the change as is evident from the history of their displacement, how they lived harmoniously observing the rules of the land, during the British rule they identified themselves with the Raj, this sense of superiority, fair skin, western education supplied an enormous solidarity in their behavior. They agree to the rules of the land, but retain cultural ethno religious identity. Conversion is never allowed in Parsees. Mistry's works are thus manifestation of the religious and cultural practices, so as to preserve the past, which is dead now and which need to be re awakened and preserved. Diaspora consciousness proves to be a true orientation syndrome, and Mistry maintains the creation of India, preserving the Parsee rituals and culture, resolving the identity crisis and developing an approach towards Transnationalism i.e to become the citizen of the world. The surging optimism and the hope to survive and the effort to change signify that Parsees believe in Browning's unconditional optimism-

"Then welcome each rebuff that turns earth's smoothness rough" (29)

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Abbreviations

TFFB- Tales From Firozsha Baag.
SALJ- Such A Long Journey.

Parsee Terminology-

Behram Roje- the sacred and auspicious 20th day of the month by Parsee calendar.
Dustoorji- the priest of a Parsee temple.
Agyaari- place of fire, a fire temple.
Kusti- sacred cord worn around the waist by Zoroastrians.
Shudra- sacred shirt
Ahura Mazda- 'Wise Lord' the Supreme Being of the Zoroastrians.
Zarathustra- the founder of Zoroastrianism
Fire Temple- place of worship of the Zoroastrians often called 'dar-e-mehr'.
Gathas- the five sacred hymns of Zarathustra.