

Diaspora and Literary Conflicts

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Colonialism has given rise to myriad experiences. Diasporic experience is one among them. For many reasons one becomes diasporic. If during the colonial period the political situation was the reason for the diasporic movement, in the postcolonial period globalization forced many to move to different parts of the world. Some moved for security reasons, while some others moved for economic reasons. Robert J. C. Young opines that, “postcolonialism is about changing world,” (2002: 7). Taking this cue from Young, Usha Bande says; “this changing world is brought about by migration, multiculturalism and globalization that have become the defining paradigm for diasporas” (2008: 22). Concomitantly, all the recent diasporas with certain exceptions, are voluntary and whatever literature that has been produced through the diasporic experience is “the product of shared culture and shared history” (22).

‘Diaspora’ is a term which is being discussed aloud in the postcolonial and postmodern context. When one moves from his/her country to another country for the reasons known, he/she cuts off the physical strings from the native. But psychologically he/she is still a part of the original place. This gives rise to a sense of physical as well as psychological dispossessions and nostalgia. It is not easy for the person from the diaspora to easily get accustomed to the foreign culture and norms. He / She always feels insecure with a sense of discontinuity between two places which could also have some resistance towards the immigrated country and its culture. As a proof to this Bande records; “... in the diasporic experience neither the acceptance of the hyphenated existence nor the disengagement from ‘home’ with a decision to move forward without looking back is as simple as theorization; it has acute psychological dynamics and endless possibilities.” (28).

Diasporic experience is enlivened with history, memory and nostalgia. And this experience will give rise to critical thinking along with cultural experiences. For a creative writer this experience forms a base for the creative literature and the conflicts, as many of the Indian writers in English have proved. Gita Mehta, Rohinton Mistry and Salman Rushdie are a few among them. This paper will concentrate on the literary conflicts faced by Gita Mehta and Rohinton Mistry as diasporic writers.

Gita Mehta began her career as a journalist, working in the print and visual media. She directed a few documentaries for the television before she embarked on a career as a novelist. She is a writer from the diaspora. Theoretically, women experience diaspora under three conditions – first, when they grow up in a foreign land with their migrant parents; secondly, by virtue of their marriage when they are uprooted from their parental home and then from their homeland; and thirdly, when they exercise their concise choice to go to some western metropolitan centre in pursuance of their ambition, higher education or some lucrative job. Whatever be the broad categorization, in real-life experience, they are caught between the psychological problems of diaspora, such as dislocation, unbelonging, marginalization, and cultural dissonance that are common also to men, and a variety of oppressive conditions and discriminatory practices peculiar to the gender, both inside and outside the community (Vidhya, 2012: 1). Gita Mehta has experienced all these diasporic attitudes.

Diasporic writers have a double task to perform in their writings. They have to represent both, their living place and their ‘home’. This is the challenging literary conflict a diasporic writer can face. Gita Mehta, quite aware of this challenge, tries to strike a balance between the two. If East is her home, West is the place where she lives. In her writings, she shows how a diasporic writer can negotiate between the cultural values of both the ends. From politics to spirituality and from saints and to dupes, she takes a distinct stand of her own treating the issues in the post-colonial background. In one of her interviews, she claims that her association with her homeland, where she still spends almost three months vacationing, helps her to rejuvenate the culture she is very much attached to. There is an interesting comment on the cover page of the book *Gita Mehta: Writing Home / Creating Homeland*, which reads:

To Gita, India is “home”. Home stands for a safe place, where there is no need to justify oneself to others, but as a member of the diaspora she ought to redefine her position. That she should feel the need to explicate and explain herself and her culture to the west is in itself an acknowledgement of cultural differences felt by the diasporic consciousness. Though she looks at her country with the bemused gaze of an outsider, her strong urge to recover the lost essence and to return to the folds of her culture become explicitly obvious. Her works are set in India but they move in and out of the two cultures, blending subjective experience with observations and imagination to recreate India that was and India that is. (Inner cover page).

This is exactly what Gita Mehta does in her fiction and non-fiction. She does not seem to brush over what she has to speak about ‘eastern mysticism’ or ‘western materialism.’ Instead, she

delves deep into these predictably different worlds and creates her own clear view of the spoken as well as the non-spoken world. By ‘unspoken world’ one should mean certain aspects, speaking of which is considered as taboo, was spoken out loudly by the novelist. For instance, there is a quite interesting incident, which explains the birth of the first book *Karma Cola* by Gita Mehta.

It was by chance that she came upon the idea, which she later developed as the theme for her book. At a publishers’ party, an informal discussion was going on about *Karma* philosophy when Gita Mehta entered the room. Seeing her in a sari, someone grabbed her arm and said, ‘here’s the girl who’s going to tell us what karma is all about’. Taking her for granted as an ‘India expert’ just because she was dressed in a sari irritated her and she retorted, ‘karma isn’t what it is cracked up to be’. Hearing this piece of conversation, Marc Jaffe of Bantam Books suggested that she should write a book on the theme. The topic was still hot in the 1970s, after it had been picked up in the 1960s with the hippies making a beeline for India in search of Nirvana. Writing a book on the concept would be, Gita thought, ‘taking the Micky out of cultish spirituality at a time when people were really scared about it’ (Smith, 1997: 53-54). She completed the book in three weeks, and the subtitle *Marketing the Mystic East* immediately grabbed the attention of both the East and the West.

This is one of the major literary conflicts in Mehta. The occident always had a second rate understanding of the orient. For them the writer from the east physically represents the east, they would try to understand the east the way in which they dress and the way in which they respond to major mystical issues. But as a diasporic writer, Mehta suavely resolves this conflict when she very sternly responds to the issue of Karma. She makes it very clear that it is the occident who goes in search of a mystic healer called Karma and that it is not forced on them.

Another diasporic writer in question is Rohinton Mistry. Like Gita Mehta even Mistry is a twice diasporic writer. Firstly his ancestors came to India from Iran and secondly Mistry, as many others, migrated to Canada in search of greener pastures. Parsi community is a migrant community in India. They came to India in A. D. 766 fearing persecution by the Muslim rulers of Iran. They travelled East in search of shelter and chanced to land at Sanjan in Gujarat, and the erstwhile ruler Jadhav Rana agreed to accommodate them in Gujarat, provided they agreed to the following conditions:

- The Parsi high priest should explain the religion to the king.
- The Parsis should give up their native Persian language and speak the local language.

- The Parsi women should give up wearing Persian robes, and instead, put on Indian costumes.
- The men should lay down their weapons.
- The Parsis should hold their wedding processions only in the dark. (Bharucha, 2003: 26-27).

An acceptance of these conditions meant that they had to forget their innate culture and embrace India as their land, not only in words, but also in deeds. These conditions presupposed that they had to change their life style entirely. Sujata Chakravorty says that due to this situation “The Parsis in India are thus in Diaspora – all Parsi sensibility is informed and influenced by this memory.” (2014: 15).

During the colonial period, the Parsis were at ease with the colonizers. They claimed themselves to be superior to the natives, and most of the time, identified themselves with the privileges enjoyed by the masters. Sujata Chakravorty says:

With the British coming to power in 1770, the Parsis made Bombay their stronghold and are concentrated there in majority more than any other place ever since. The Parsis were also greatly impressed by the lifestyle of the British and emulated them in manners, customs and costumes. They greatly identified with the colonizers and became very westernized which in turn increased the animosity of the Indian mainstream towards their community (15-16).

Novy Kapadia who also holds similar views says:

In the pre-independence era, many Parsis availed British patronage and enjoyed other prerogatives granted by the rulers. Believing that the English rule was here to stay, they became ‘progressive’ with their belief in English education and were liberal in everyday secular practices. Their belief in modes of progress and in British rule made them more progressive as compared to the rest of the nation reeling under the foreign rule (2001: 10).

The departure of the British from India destabilized the existence of the Parsis for the second time. Indian independence created a vacuum in them. They felt more and more marginalized and threatened by the ‘dominant Hindu Community’ (Chakravorty, 16). This fear of marginalization and identity crises dislocated them once again. Some of the Parsis relocated in countries like Australia, USA, UK, and Canada. It served two purposes. Firstly, it gave them a chance to escape from the threat of majoritarian, Hindu dominant fanaticism and, secondly, it

gave them an opportunity to become economically stable. The novelist, Rohinton Mistry is an example of the second type of diasporic movement.

Not all of the Parsis, who had migrated to India from Iran, moved towards the West for the said purposes. Many of them stayed back and tried to negotiate with the indigenous culture. But, those who wanted to stay back were in a minority. Commenting on the dwindling Parsi community in India, Nilufer Bharucha says; “the Parsis are a miniscule minority in India and number only 80,000 today”(1998: 18). No doubt, at present, Parsi is an ethno-religious minority community in India. But, their contribution to the Indian society, economics, commerce, science, politics, and literature has been remarkable. It was due to the attention they attracted from the colonial masters during the colonial period. But after independence, during the post-colonial period, certain economic and political policies weakened the importance of the Parsis in all these areas.

This brings us to the point wherein we can see how Mistry negotiated the diasporic literary conflicts. He wanted to represent his waning community in literature. If nostalgia controlled the psyche of some of the diasporic writers, with Mistry it was the criticism of the way in which his community was treated in India. In his novels, he comes down harshly upon certain government policies for pushing the Parsis to the periphery. The Parsis were considered kings of the banking sector. They were the owners of the private banking sector in the post-independence era. It was in India, they felt, that a tradition was followed for a respectable lifestyle. But the decision of the then Prime Minister to nationalize all these private banks was a major blow not only for their identity, but also for their existence in India. They felt their backbone broken. Mistry in his novel *Such a Long Journey* makes Dinshawji, an employee of the bank, to voice his dissatisfaction. Dinshawji tells Gustad, the protagonist of the novel:

What days those were, yaar. What fun we used to have ... Parsis were the kings of Banking in those days. Such respect we used to get. Now the whole atmosphere only has been spoiled. Ever since that Indira nationalized the banks (2006: 38).

Various factors could be held responsible for the dwindling ethno-religious Parsi community. One of the major reasons could be the traditional rigidity they continued to practice even after their arrival to India. This not only made their community a secluded one, but also became a reason for stagnation of population in their own community. Factors such as late marriages, low birth rate, high rate of divorce, children of Parsi females who married outside the community not accepted into the original faith, etc. have contributed to the low growth rate of the community.

Mistry also becomes an emancipator of social menaces. It becomes easy for him as a diasporic writer to observe the pathetic conditions of the lower class people residing in India and present a critic of the treatment they were forced into. Probably his diasporic nature helped him to make an observation very minutely. His exposure to the Western egalitarian country gave him required sharpness to observe the inhuman treatment very minutely. In his novel *A Fine Balance* along with many other incidents he narrates a ghastly incident in which a Chammaar family had to face the brunt of the upper class for claiming their legislative rights.

For the first time in generations Dukhi's sons are educated and one of them by name Narayan, after a few years, returns to his village and dares to claim his voting right in the parliamentary elections, which angers Thakur Dhsramsi, the chieftain of the village. The lower caste people as usual had to press the thumb impression on the register, colour their finger with the indelible ink, and disappear from there. The contact with the outer world made Narayan aware of his constitutional rights, which made him firmly press for it. But, the claim for 'right' proved 'wrong' for Narayan. He and two others, who had joined their voices to Narayan's, were dragged out and ruthlessly murdered.

In the evening, after the ballot boxes were taken away, burning coals were held to the three men's genitals, then stuffed into their mouths. Their screams were heard through the village until their lips and tongues melted away. The still, silent bodies were taken down from the tree. When they began to stir, the ropes transferred from their ankles to their necks, and the three were hanged. The bodies were displayed in the village square (Mistry, 1995: 145).

It cannot be denied that the diasporic experience has given a lot of scope for the writers to think for their home land without any pressure. Sometimes nostalgia must have guided the thoughts and sometimes bitter experiences. The two writers, Mehta and Mistry have effectively navigated their literary conflicts very vigilantly that the former became the cultural voice of India and the later became the voice of the minority community and the downtrodden.

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