

Negotiating the Cultural Differences: Immigrant as a Cultural Hybrid in Selected Stories from *Tales from Firozsha Baag* by Rohinton Mistry

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Abstract

Diaspora, transcending national boundaries, has challenged and destabilised the exclusionary notions of cultural identity by fragmenting cultural codes and emphasising cultural plurality and difference. This paper critically analyses selected stories from Tales from Firozsha Baag by Rohinton Mistry to highlight practices of ‘Othering’ and the displacement experienced by an immigrant who feels culturally estranged in his Western host country. Focusing on cultural engagement as well as the alienation of the immigrant from both his old and new cultures, the paper explores how this transcultural space unsettles and disrupts essentialising constructions of identity and creates hybrid identities. The immigrant then uses his cultural hybrid position as a mode of resistance against the power dynamics and regimes of representation that categorize, fix, and view immigrant communities in their host societies.

Keywords: Cultural Difference, Cultural Otherness, Hybrid Identity, In-between Space, Third Space, Cultural Identity, Immigrant

Introduction

The essential effect of migration is to put into effect the cultural differences by juxtaposing the host culture with that of the immigrant’s culture of origin. An immigrant’s cultural transplantation into a foreign value system not only accentuates his sense of loss and cultural dislocation, but also interrogates and subverts the exclusionary construction of cultural identity and meanings. The bi-cultural or multicultural situation of diaspora produces marginal positions for immigrants who are considered as the cultural ‘other’ and find themselves on the receiving end of the dominant culture in their host society. They encounter challenges of assimilation and adjustment in the dominant culture and their position is marked by ambivalence and uncertainty that determines their attitude towards the host society and their lost ‘home’ and ‘nation’. In their attempts to negotiate their marginal space and cultural difference, immigrants struggle to come out of their ghetto to engage in a freer and more complex mainstream cultural life. As a consequence, ... there appeared a new type of personality, namely, a cultural hybrid, a man living and sharing intimately in the cultural life and traditions of two distinct peoples; never quite willing to break, even if he were permitted to do so, with his past and his traditions, and not quite accepted, because of racial prejudice, in the new society in which he now sought to find a place. He was a

man on the margin of two cultures and two societies, which never completely interpenetrated and fused. (Park 892)

Thus, the immigrant's existence on the borderline makes diaspora culture and communities fundamentally ambivalent, sustained in hybrid historical conjunctures, thereby, giving rise to hybrid cultures and identities that bear the influence of two cultures and the socio-economic reality of two societies. Drawing on Bhabha's ideas of hybridity, this paper explores how immigrants utilize their positioning between two cultures to interrogate exclusionary constructions of identity and negotiate their cultural differences to construct a new identity, thereby transforming hegemonic power relations with their host culture without sanctifying or glorifying their dominant values.

Cultural Hybridity and Third Space as a Disruption of Exclusionary Identities

Homi Bhabha defines hybridity as the name given to "the strategic reversal of the process of domination through disavowal" (112). It is a subversive power that challenges fixed identities and denies dominant cultural narratives and regimes of representation in which immigrant communities are positioned, fixed, and viewed in their host societies. As a cultural strategy, it avoids the perpetuation of antagonistic binarisms and promotes inclusion rather than exclusion, fostering multi-faceted instead of dualistic patterns of cultural exchange and growth. In this context, hybridity, which denies the "essentialism of a prior given originary or original culture," emerges as a "third space that enables other positions to emerge" (Rutherford 211). It displaces the histories from which it originates and "sets up new structures of authority, new political initiatives, which are inadequately understood through received wisdom" (Rutherford 211). This creation of the third space challenges the idea of fixed cultural meanings and representations; instead, it presents it as a fractured and ambivalent process influenced by power structures.

Third Space as a Site for Identity Construction

The immigrant or cultural hybrid uses this third space as a site of empowerment, where diaspora can negotiate cultural differences and meanings to construct a new identity and resist assimilation into the dominant host culture. Hence, cultural hybridity, as a 'third space', is a productive space that "initiate[s] new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation" and "gives rise to ... a new area of negotiation of meaning and representation" (Bhabha 2; Rutherford 211). Jasbir Jain compares the third space with Foucauldian "heterotopias" which Foucault contrasts with utopia for it comes to represent a countersite like a resting place, prison, theatre, or sanatorium "where all the other real sites that can be found within a culture are simultaneously represented, contrasted and inverted", and where a juxtaposition of the otherwise incompatible can take place (Jain 103; Foucault and Miskowice 24). For Jasbir Jain, the 'third space' is determinative of identity construction for a diaspora subject. As the identity of a subject is connected with their "self-image and the unconsciously inherited positionings", it is constructed through various specifics like language, history, myth, race, psychology etc. (103). The creation of the third space reflects these complexities of identity.

Third Space as a Site of Cultural plurality

The existence of the third space also disrupts the idea of the purity of culture. The inevitable mixing of cultures in diaspora provides the possibility to construct another identity that is of "Translation" which refers to "those identity formations which cut across and intersect natural

frontiers, and which are composed of people who have been *dispersed* forever from their homelands” (Hall 310). Realizing the impossibility of returning to the past, such people are obliged to cope with the new cultural positions they occupy without losing their identities completely. They carry traces of their cultural histories, languages and traditions but are still unable to be “*unified* in the old sense, because they are irrevocably the product of several interlocking histories and cultures, belong at one and at the same time to several ‘homes’ (and to no one particular ‘home’)” (Hall 310). As a cultural hybrid, they are “irrevocably *translated*” (Hall 310). As “translated men” who have been borne across the world, they learn to inhabit two identities, to speak two cultural languages, and to translate and negotiate between them (Rushdie 17). Therefore, diasporic positions refusing to conform to any absolute identities give a new kind of identity i.e. cultural hybridity.

Cultural Hybridity and Diaspora Writings

Diaspora writers like Salman Rushdie, Jhumpa Lahiri, Bharati Mukherjee and many more celebrate their position of cultural hybridity as “plural and partial,” viewing it as both valuable and a fertile space for creation (Rushdie 15). It offers migrant writers critical distance and resistance to cultural authoritarianism and its claims of possessing the absolute truth. As both outsiders and insiders of society, diaspora writers can write from a dual perspective, enabling them to portray their communities with nostalgia and displacement while also critically examining the contemporary history and culture of their nations. Their works, marked by a sense of dislocation, homelessness, an ambivalent relationship with the host culture, and an inability to return, raise important questions about power structures, cultural otherness, nostalgia, identity crises, and hybridity in their land of settlement. Their permanent inhabitation on shifting boundaries provides them with an accurate view to challenge concepts of centrality—whether of the empirical centre or the national centre. However, this constant shifting has also led to social disintegration, a divided self, and feelings of loss and fragmentation. Despite this, their approach to fragmentation is one of self-reflexive celebration. Consequently, diaspora writings occupy a significant place in the literary world, as they define identities, generate cultural theories, and give visibility to the immigrant minority within the dominant Western discourse.

Analysis

Rohinton Mistry is an Indian-born Canadian diaspora writer belonging to the Parsi community, an ethnic minority of India. Exploring the themes of identity crisis and homelessness, his writings record the experiences of diaspora and double displacement within his Parsi community which migrated to India after being exiled from Persia, and now are migrating to the West for better opportunities. Mistry’s collection of short stories, *Tales from Firozsha Baag (TFFB)* (1987), focuses on the Parsi emigration to foreign countries seeking a better future, and depicts the uprootedness, geographical and cultural dislocation of his diasporic characters. The stories show that the most noticeable problem for immigrants is constructing a new identity in the new country as they feel displaced from their own culture. Their attempts to make life livable in diaspora may range from assimilation into the new host culture to recreating the old country in the new. In short stories, this sense of alienation is experienced by various Parsi characters who migrate to Canada and are subject to cultural otherness. Positioned at the margins, their relationship with their host culture is one of ambivalence, and they undergo the process of hy-

bridization of their own identities.

Mistry, in his migration stories, has articulated this ambivalent space between the old Indian culture and the new Canadian culture by showing the oscillation of his characters between their old and new homes that reflects their engagement with the process of shaping their own hybridity. He has shown how his characters, in their struggle to define their positioning in the host culture, move out of “the nostalgia-protest syndrome” and create a third space by distancing themselves from both cultures— original and their host culture— to minimize polarization and the pulls of individual identity (Jain 101).

Three stories, “Squatter,” “Lend Me Your Light,” and “Swimming Lessons” problematize immigrants’ cultural difference as a category of exclusion and otherness. Through the character of Sarosh, the story “Squatters” uses bodily functions to highlight this difference and the maladaptation of an immigrant who fails to use the English toilet. In the story, “the toilet habits become metonymic of Otherness ... While defecating is natural and universal, the ways to defecate are cultural as well as culturally specific. Squatting becomes the sign of a different culture, a culture, moreover, in which sitting (rather than squatting) becomes the marked case, i.e. the unusual way of defecating” (Genetsch 121). Sarosh’s inability to adapt to Western cultural and toilet habits signals his failure to adjust to a new culture leading to his isolation and cultural alienation which manifests through his personal unease and social displacement. In his mind, he sees his failure to adapt to his host culture as giving rise to an increased sense of hostility and xenophobia on the social level, and he feels rejected as a foreign and intrusive presence in the host culture. He considers himself as nothing but “a failure not just in the washrooms of the nation but everywhere” (*TFFB* 196). The resultant feelings of guilt and shame point to the cultural difference that becomes an encumbrance rather than a resource in arriving at social and cultural inclusion in the host country. His attempts to change his name to Sid and his efforts to use an English toilet in Canadian style signify his desire to erase the cultural difference and assimilate into Western culture. However, it is impossible to deny this difference because “it is written on the body,” and erasure will result in “disorientation and uprooting” (Genetsch 125). He correlates toilet habits with one’s core identity and the name with peripheral aspects of identity. Thus, naming and defecating correspond to an inside and an outside image of the self and become valid indicators of identity.

Mistry uses Sarosh’s disillusionment with life in the land of milk and honey as a weapon to criticize the hollowness of Canada’s claims of being a multicultural mosaic. Sarosh feels “mosaic and melting pot are both nonsense and ethnic is a polite way of saying bloody foreigner” (*TFFB* 194). The satirical solution to Sarosh’s problem by Dr. No-Ilaaz through the implantation of a small device, Crappus Non Interrupts, or CNI, in the bowels satirizes the ineffectiveness of Canada’s multicultural policies and strategies to facilitate an immigrant and their mechanistic view of identity formation. Dr. No-Ilaaz’s comment that with the implantation of CNI, Sarosh will be “permanently different” from his family and friends “whether this country or that” carries the connotations of an ambivalent positioning of an immigrant due to his cultural dislocation and alienation from the host culture as well as the old homeland (*TFFB* 195). This ambivalence results from “the problematic relationship between interlocking cultural landscapes, between an ethnic heritage and a new life in the West” (Heble 52). A successful defecation in a sitting position during his return flight to India— which is over neither India nor Canada, symbolizes Sarosh’s positioning in-between space as he stands “on the boundary between two groups ... located in a social ‘no man’s land’” (Kurt 39). He becomes ‘Other’ permanently,

belonging fully to neither place, which makes him “‘unhomed’ in the most essential sense of the term” (Dangwal 70).

This experience of cultural uprootedness through migration is further highlighted in “Lend Me Your Light.” The story employs cultural positioning of characters to illustrate their attitude towards “cultural difference as a marker of identity that can either be rejected, or accepted, or result in confusion as to how to lead one’s life in a diaspora situation” (Genetsch 125). In the story, Kersi’s sense of guilt and ambivalence as a member of the diaspora is contrasted with his brother Persi’s sense of contentment and sacrifice which he derives from his service to the rural folks in India, connecting him to his roots. Kersi’s self-comparison with the blind ancient Greek prophet Tiresias— an old man lurking in-between spaces— highlights his ambivalent positioning between two cultures as “blind and throbbing between two lives, the one in Bombay and the one to come in Toronto ...” which makes him unable to see his past and future and alienates him from both older and newer diasporic contexts (*TFFB* 217).

This cultural and racial difference as marker of identity is carried forward in “Swimming Lessons”, through Kersi’s (Kersi is the main character in both stories “Lend me your Light” and “Swimming Lessons”) classification of himself as a “non-white immigrant” and an “Asian brown body”—a marker of his Indian roots that also indicates his sense of exclusion and alienation from the host society (*TFFB* 283). His emphasis on cultural difference as a marker of his identity is propelled by racism that is embedded as an ideology in Canada’s institutional structures and is manifested in its social practices. In the story, the cultural ‘otherness’ of Kersi, an Asian, becomes perceptible through an open display of racism, prejudice, and acrimony against him by three White youngsters at the swimming pool who make him an unwelcome guest at the pool and an ‘other’ to mainstream life. They comment, “Paki, Paki, smell like curry... pretty soon all the water’s going to taste of curry” (*TFFB* 286). This incident of blatant racism is indicative of the fact that even in allegedly tolerant and liberal Canada, understanding of cultural difference comes through stereotypes that distort the self-image of Kersi. This discrimination hinders the process of adaptation for an immigrant, and he remains indifferent to the new culture. Swimming becomes a metaphor for assimilation in the story, and Kersi’s fear of water and his lack of effort in lessons symbolize his “inability to commit to Canada” (McElwain 20). The disillusionment of his sexual fantasy about English women is used as a metaphor to show the ending of his infatuation with the host country that seemed a land of dreams from a distance, just as the bodies of women were reflecting a glow in the “lustrous trick of sun-and-lotion” from a distance (*TFFB* 280).

Although these stories highlight the inevitability of immigrants’ sense of loss and their desperate attempt to cling to their ethnic roots through reclamation and a return to their old cultural selves, they also subtly allude to their cultural hybridity. In “Swimming Lessons”, Kersi’s persistent retreat to his memories of the past reveals his ambivalent relationship with his host society while also grounding his resistance to assimilation in the host culture. In “Lend Me Your Light”, Kersi expresses his pull for his ethnic roots through his construction of an imaginary ‘Little India’ in a foreign land— a section of Toronto’s Gerrard Street in Canada, which is known for Indian cuisines, grocery shops and Hindi movies for entertainment. His use of untranslated words to explain Indian cuisine like *bhelpuri*, *panipuri*, *batata wada*, and *kulfi*, in a letter to his friend, expresses his nostalgia about his old Indian culture and his attempt to retain his Indianness (*TFFB* 220). Although, Kersi asserts his cultural difference through the

very “act of writing non-English terms” but his choice of words for describing ‘the Little India’ in Canada using a “deliberate admixture of words and phrases from his domain of experience in India” despite his best knowledge of English vocabulary, simultaneously, articulates his cultural hybridity and not merely the experience of Indianness (Heble 59). He further acknowledges his hybridity through his confession of having visited “Little India” on Gerrard Street in Toronto only once and feeling ill at ease while visiting the place as well as his sense of shame for not feeling nostalgic about India (*TFFB* 220). His confession reveals the constructedness of his memory of India and the authentic Indian essence that he seeks to recover. It is further testified by his feelings of ambiguity and his alienation from his old home and home crowd during his return visit to India. He, rather than idolizing Bombay as home city, offers a critique of Bombay—metonymically India, making a plea for better living conditions and assimilation. His inability to conceive his old homeland as constructed in the imaginative mind confirms that the immigrant’s return to home and past is always “mythic, a stuff of longing and prayers ... as imagined it never happens, there is no final return” (Bhabha 165). As an immigrant, he “straddle[s] two cultures,” therefore, his identity is “at once plural and partial” enabling him to recognize the duality of his existence and fluidity of his identity (Rushdie 15). This duality of existence does not see his ethnic identity “as a fragile identity to be preserved against obliteration, ... but as a set of fluid identities to be celebrated” (Mukherjee 3).

After deconstructing the past and old homeland as an imaginary construct, Kersi reacquaints his inhabitation in the ambivalent space between cultures. He emerges as a subject whose ambivalent positioning in the host culture “represents a hybridity, a difference ‘within’, a subject that inhabits the rim of an ‘in-between’ reality” (Bhabha 19). He concludes his plight as: “I Tiresias, throbbing between two lives, / Humbled by ambiguities and dichotomies confronting me...” (*TFFB* 233). Kersi’s sense of displacement from his new and old homeland and his self-image as “throbbing between two lives” reminds one of a metaphor of “a Trishanku existence” used by Uma Parameswaran. She describes a diaspora space as a liminal space, “a Trishanku existence” in which members of diaspora live and their sensibilities are shaped by the forces and environments of two different worlds. (292). In this way, Kersi’s ambiguity and dichotomy highlight the difficulty of defining immigrant identity solely based on one’s ancestral past or one’s capability to integrate into the new culture.

Conclusion

Kersi’s cultural hybridity in “Swimming Lessons” helps him understand that identity, rather than being a fixed state, is a matter of process. His positioning between cultures creates a third space for him where he can speak of and negotiate his essential cultural and ethnic differences and similarities with mainstream culture through his act of story writing. His writing, acquiring redemptive qualities, helps in searching for a new self-image in a foreign land without losing his essential differences. Kersi, through his story writing, becomes a symbol of a diaspora writer whose writing provides him with catharsis by allowing him space, memory, and a sense of continuity, and opens up new perspectives to negotiate his cultural marginality, in-between position and hybridity. This creation of a third space by the diasporic writer can also be interpreted as an act of resistance or an attempt to avoid the dilemma of a schizophrenic split. It provides him with the freedom to move freely outside the existing cultural frameworks where he resists confinement to any single tradition. Kersi, as a diaspora writer uses his marginal

peripheral position as a point of negotiation and intervention in the host culture to construct a new identity as a cultural hybrid.

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