

MULTICULTURALISM: COUNTER TO ASSIMILATION AND ALIENATION IN DIASPORIC FICTION OF MISTRY'S TALES FROM FIROZSHA BAAG

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Abstract:

Migration has been a common phenomenon for man from time immemorial. He has always moved from one place to another for better conditions and situations. In the era of globalization, migration has been accelerated due to the advancement in the field of science and technology. But it has also created a problem of cultural diversity because a person is a bearer of his culture. When he moves to a new land, he encounters the culture of the host land. He has to learn to negotiate between his home culture and host culture; he is attracted towards assimilation which leads to alienation. In the present research paper the researcher has tried to explore and discover how the problems of assimilation and alienation that arise due to cultural diversity can be resolved through the process of integration that is fostered by multiculturalism.

Keywords: Culture, assimilation, alienation, integration, multiculturalism, migrant, host and home.

Introduction:

Rohinton Mistry is an Indian born Canadian writer who has migrated to Canada after the declaration of emergency in 1975. He has highlighted the problems of diaspora which are pertinent due to cultural identity of their homeland which clashes with the cultures of host land. When a person migrates from his home country to the host land he does not merely move with his baggage of clothes and commodities but most importantly carries the baggage of his home culture that is ingrained in his personality that cannot be erased so easily. M.R Habib defines culture as "the beliefs, rituals and practices of a given social or ethnic group or nation..... the word has been used to refer to what is produced by human beings as opposed to 'nature'" (2008:172). Immigration has become a common feature in the 20th century it has not remained the forced movements as indentured labourers. Now the Intellectuals of the society migrate voluntarily to different parts of the world for

economic prosperity. Due to migration of a large number of people from different parts of the world more and more countries are becoming multicultural. They follow the policy of multiculturalism which is social in nature in which the multiple cultural groups live in peaceful coexistence retaining their cultural identity. Tahir Kamran asserts:

Multiculturalism denotes diversity of class, gender, language, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and religious persuasion in one society. The underlying premise on which the whole discourse of multiculturalism rests refers to the recognition of diversity 'as opposed to a monoculturalistic attitude that is based on a belief in the supremacy of one social/culture group and demands monocentric assimilation to the dominant culture' (2007:93).

It is found when a person migrates from his home country to the host country. He confronts with host cultures which are altogether a strange experience for him. He is in a dilemma whether to assimilate in the culture of the dominant /host land or to retain their home culture. It becomes a weird experience for the migrants when he has to negotiate with them. When he is not able to cope with them (home and host cultures) it leads to alienation. These experiences are vividly delineated by Mistry in the three short stories taken from *Tales from Ferozsha Baag* (TFB: 2003) namely "Squatter, Lend Me Your Light and Swimming Lessons.

Diasporic writers often deal with the problem of cultural identity that is quite resemblance in their writings Rohinton Mistry is also a diasporic writer who has surfaced the problems of immigration. In the short story Squatter in which the protagonist is Sarosh who migrates to Canada. But before he moves to Canada, a farewell party is organised and there starts a heated argument between two groups. One is of the view that migration will bring a lot of happiness and prosperity and the other counters that it is a wrong decision that can spoil the life of the person and makes him an unhappy soul. So Sarosh proclaims that "My dear family, my dear

friends, if I do not become completely Canadian in exactly ten years from the time I land there, then I will come back. I promise. So please, no more arguments. Enjoy the party” (TFB 2003:187). After staying for a few months in Canada, he changes his name from Sarosh to Sid, it reflects his desire to assimilate into a Canadian culture that is in the host culture. But he faces a problem to evacuate in the western style which he considers a block in his path to be a perfect Canadian by submerging in the cultural practice of his host land. He tries on several occasions to relieve in the style of sitting that is the conventional practice of the Canadians but on each occasion he fails, he defecates only in squatting position -the practice of his home land. When he does not evacuate in the western style it leads to a psychological problem. “Now whole days went by seated on the toilet, and he stubbornly refused to relieve himself the other way. The doorbell would ring only to be ignored. The telephone went answered. Sometimes, he would awake suddenly in the dark hours before dawn and rush to the washroom like a madman” (TFB 2003:198). He frequently gets late to reach his office so he is warned by his supervisor to be careful “if it keeps up the consequences could be serious as far as his career is concerned” (TFB 2003:190).

Sarosh forgets that the habit of squatting which is associated with the cultural practice of a person and there is no shame and disgrace to practise it in the foreign land. Either way is better or worse it is a cultural practice of the person in which he is born and brought up. There can be more than one way of defecating .But he thinks assimilation is the only way to progress and prosper in the Canadian society when he is unable to alter his evacuation style .He becomes alienated and rues “There had been a time when it was perfectly natural to squat. Now it seemed a grotesquely aberrant thing to do. Wherever he went he was reminded of the ignominy of his way. If he could not be westernised in all respects , he was nothing but a failure in this land – a failure not just in the washrooms of the nation but everywhere”(TFB 2003:196).He does not understand changing the name is superficial and is not ingrained in his personality as the habit of evacuation that causes him alienation. He has failed to adapt himself in the host culture because he has stooped to assimilation. He thinks difference is shameful whereas in the theory of multiculturalism difference /diversity is always celebrated that is the leitmotif of multiculturalism that lies in difference not in sameness. It has been

well pointed by Mistry in search of assimilation, a migrants is not only detached from his country and fellow countrymen but from the host country as well .It is conspicuous in the words of advice of Dr. No Ilaz when he meets and shares his problem with him ,he suggests that CNI can be implanted in the bowels that can help him to get rid of the problem of squatting and he can evacuate in western style .He cautions him “In fact, in this country or that, it will set you apart from your fellow countrymen. So you must consider the whole thing most carefully (TFB 2003:195).

At the end of the story, he is not able to adapt and assimilate into the Canadian society hence he packs his luggage and boards the flight to India but as the flight takes off he feel something writhing in his stomach. He goes into the lavatory where he evacuates successfully in the sitting posture not squatting .But it is too late for him what he has not been able to achieve in ten years during his stay in Canada .Implicitly the problem of his cultural identity is resolved in between that lies in space that is neither here nor there. It simply means that when a person encounter to alien culture, he should neither try to assimilate in the foreign culture nor alienate from his home culture. What he should do is to integrate. That is the best solution when he has to employ while negotiating with the issue of home and host culture.

“Lend Me Your Light” is also the story that highlights the dilemma of the immigrants .This is the story of three Parsi boys-Percy and Kersi Boyce and their friend Jamshed. Percy is the elder brother of Kersi. Percy and Jamshed are classmates. All three of them are in the same school. Jamshed has the desire to migrate to America as he abhors India whereas Kersi to Canada but he is oscillating between home and host culture. Percy moves to different villages of India in order to improve the financial condition of the poor farmers who have been exploited by the landlords by lending money on high interest rate. Since school days Jamshed’s life is surrounded with everything that is imported, he does not partake his lunch in the hall amidst the other students. “ His food arrived precisely at one o’ clock in the chauffeur-driven , air conditioned family air, and was eaten in the leather upholstered luxury of the back seat, amid this collection of hyphenated lavishness” (TFB 2003:210). Jamshed feels alienated from his home country as there is nothing in his personality that reflect home culture. He is born in India but he has been brought up like a foreigner so he submerged quite easily in the

American culture. He vehemently criticizes his home country “Bloody corruption everywhere. And you can’t buy any of the thing you want, don’t even get to see a decent English movie. First Chance I get, I’m going abroad. Preferably the U.S.” (TFB 2003:215).

Kersi migrates to Canada but his experience is quite different from Jamshed who assimilates in the host culture of the U.S. Kersi keeps his cultural identity intact in foreign land. During his stay in Canada, he joins the Parsi society of Ontario and befriends with the people of Bombay. He also discovers the place in Canada which is a mini India in Canada. It clearly indicates the he has not forgotten his home culture in the host land. The cultural markers of his home land prompt him to look for the place where he can satisfy himself from food of India “bhelpuri, panipur, batata – wada, kulfi as authentic as any Bombay.” He writes to Jamshed, “We could browse through the shops selling imported spices and Hindi records, and maybe even see a Hindi movie at the Naaz Cinema. I often went to Little India.” (TFB 2003:220). Kersi never tries to assimilate in the westernised culture so he does not face the problem of alienation. He is also reminded through the symbolic act not to become blind to home culture. Just two days before he has to migrate to Canada, he feels severe pain in his eyes - “I saw myself as some out of Greek tragedy, guilt of the sin of hubris for seeking emigration out of the land of my birth, and paying the price in burnt-out eyes: I, Tiresias, blind and throbbing between two lives, the one in Bombay and the one to come in Toronto” (TFB 2003:217). It cues him that Tiresias is blind but can see the future but he should not become blind in spite of vision; he has to integrate in the culture of home and host land. In the concluding part of the story he admits that he has been humbled by the difference of the two cultures-home and host and that is his epiphany that he has to integrate the difference in culture. Kersi meditates “I Tiresias, throbbing between two lives, humbled by the ambiguities and dichotomies confronting me.....” (TFB 2003:233).

The last short story is “Swimming Lessons.” It has been set in Canada and the character of Kersi resurfaces here, it seems that he is an alter ego of Mistry and has migrated to Canada and has become a writer. In this story he tries to learn swimming in Canada and therefore he joins the swimming classes behind his apartment – Don Mills apartment in which he lives in Toronto and the residents of the building are not like the people of the same culture and community as in Firozsha

Baag in Bombay but they are from different countries and cultures. The dwellers of the apartment consist of Portuguese Woman, Berthe - the Yugoslavian cantankerous woman who lives along with her boozing husband and son – is the superintendent of the building, the wheelchair borne old man stays with his divorced daughter from Vancouver, two young women whose identities are not clear but they speak with Scottish accent so they must be from Scotland and the writer from India. The building represents the Canadian policy of multiculturalism. The problem of racism and xenophobia has been exposed by Mistry when Kersi goes to take the shower before swimming he overhears the racist comment from the three boys “one of them holds his nose. The second begins 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 2003:286).

The nagging problem which Kersi faces here is that he is not able to learn swimming neither in Canada nor in India whereas the image of water is always enticing him. He asserts “Water imagery in my life is recurring. Chowpatty beach, now the high school swimming pool. The universal symbol of life and regeneration did nothing but frustrate me. Perhaps the swimming pool will overturn the failure.” (TFB 2003:281). Kersi tries very hard to learn swimming but he can’t. The trope of water is employed by Mistry to resolve the issue of cultures of home and host land in this story. Kersi’s failure to learn swimming in his home land in Chaupatty beach and swimming pool in Canada indicates that he is not ready to submerge neither in home culture nor in host culture as the Parsis the descents of Persia modern day Iran. It is the double displacement of the Parsis who have migrated to western countries. In this story, Mistry implies that there is no need to assimilate in the culture of the host land but the ideal way is to integrate that is multiculturalism that believes in cultural diversity.

Conclusion:

The problem which starts with Sarosh/Sid in the story –Squatter, Sarosh wants to erase his identity but can’t, he resolves his problem of evacuation of his bowels in western style when the flight takes off- that clearly indicates that there is no need to assimilate in the Canadian culture because it doesn’t demand but he makes vain efforts and alienates from the home culture. The solution rests in between it is neither in home nor in host culture but it is in integration .The symbols and Greek figure (evacuation, Tiresias and water) are

employed by Mistry very artistically to bring forth his point of integration. In the story, Kersi Boyce learns to maintain balance between home and host culture after the epiphany and in the last story, Swimming Lessons, the imagery of water resolves his problem of cultural conflict when he ponders that his failure to learn swimming in his home and host land indicates that he is not supposed to submerge in any of the culture but to integrate. Water is rightly considered the symbol of life and regeneration and it brings new life for him in the host land embracing integrating that is multiculturalism which celebrates cultural diversity.

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