


Rohinton Mistry
'Swimming Lessons'

The background of the page features a large, faint, circular seal of the University of Delhi. The seal contains the university's name in English and Hindi, along with a central emblem depicting an open book and a lotus flower.

Discipline Courses-I
Semester-I
Paper: Indian Writing in English
Lesson: Rohinton Mistry, 'Swimming Lessons'
Lesson Developer: Nidhi Madan
College/Department: Mata Sundri College for Women,
University of Delhi

Rohinton Mistry **'Swimming Lessons'**

Rohinton Mistry: A Profile

Rohinton Mistry, a Parsi Zoroastrian was born in 1952 in Mumbai. He did his B.A in Mathematics and Economics from St. Xavier's College-Autonomous, University of Mumbai, Mumbai. He immigrated from Mumbai to Canada in the year 1975, at the age of 23, where he studied at the University of Toronto and did his B.A in English and Philosophy. While he was settled in Canada, he began to write stories which attracted immediate attention. He won two Hart House literary prizes and Canadian Fiction Magazine's annual Contributor's Prize in 1985.¹ He has received many awards to his credit namely, Scotiabank Giller Prize, Oprah's Book Club, Neustadt International Prize for Literature, Governor General's Award for English-language fiction and Guggenheim Fellowship for Creative Arts, US & Canada. He has also been nominated for the Man Booker Prize, Man Booker International Prize and International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award.

Mistry belongs to the Diasporic group of writers who thereafter settled in Canada, after acquiring Canadian citizenship. However, he can be considered as "twice displaced"², the first displacement was a result of his belonging "to an ethnic group that migrated to India in the thirteenth century AD"³, while the second displacement was a consequence of his choice to migrate to Canada from Mumbai in 1975.



¹ Source: <http://postcolonialstudies.emory.edu/rohinton-mistry/>
Accessed on 1/12/13 at 9:20 pm.

² As Nilufer E. Bharucha mentions Rohinton Mistry's "peoples had first become diasporic when they had left Iran around the time of the Islamic conquest of the Persian Empire and arriving with their sacred fires had sought refuge in India-a refuge that had seen the highs and lows of the Islamic incursions into Gujarat, the subsequent acceptance during the reign of the eclectic Akbar, the coming out of agricultural spaces into those of commerce and industry during the British colonisation of India, the moving back into ethnic enclosures during the blood-bath of the partitioning of the Indian subcontinent, and the feeling of unease of a very tiny community in postcolonial India". Taken from Nilufer E. Bharucha, Preface, *Rohinton Mistry: Ethnic Enclosures and Transcultural Spaces*, ed. Jasbir Jain. (Jaipur and New Delhi, India: Rawat Publications, 2003) 14-5.

³ Taken from Anjali Gera Roy & Meena T Pillai, eds., *Rohinton Mistry: An Anthology of Recent Criticism*, 1st ed. (New Delhi, India: Pencraft International, 2007) 14.

Picture 1

<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/mar/30/rohinton-mistry-profile>

Accessed on 15/11/2013 at 9:25pm.

His constant returning to India as a focal point for the themes and matter of his stories and novels, seems to be fraught with an attempt to locate himself at a stable point, which was once his homeland and also enables us to see within this 'returning' a moment of nostalgia, and an attempt on his part to stay connected with his roots- perhaps, the only stable anchor for identity formation, despite belonging to the Diaspora.

The Evolution of the Indian-English Short Story

A study of Mistry's narrative technique involves a study of the development of the Indian-English short story as we know it today. Though it emerged late in the literary world, the Indian-English short story encompasses within its fold a wide range in its subject matter as well as in the scope of techniques used by these writers. Originating in its nascent form, earlier in the ancient Indian classical tradition of the Panchatantras and the fables, it came into wider practise with time in the later part of the nineteenth century, in 1898 to be more precise with the first collection of short stories entitled "Stories from Indian Christian Life", written by Kamala Sathianandan.⁴

The Indian-English short stories were largely influenced by western writers as "many Indian writers carried the impression of Edgar Allan Poe, Arthur Conan Doyle, Chekhov and others,"⁵ despite the fact that they were not remarkably striking in technique as they "kept close to formulistic in design, hardly ever delving deep into the character's psyche."⁶

The focus of the early writers of the short story, as in fiction, was on trying to draw the reader's attention to social evils existing in India then, often trying to engage with the individual mind as responding to these social conditions.

With the forties, the short story begins to mature and develop in form. Popular writers of this period include Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao and R.K Narayan. Mulk Raj Anand's short stories reveal a sympathetic stance towards the lowly and underprivileged sections in society. While Raja Rao's works focus on "reflecting the Nationalist upsurge of the Gandhian days" and "are based on popular myths."⁷ He aims at presenting India revealing "the impact of its cultural past and its tradition on its people's attitude to life's ups and downs."⁸ However, he confines himself to present to his readers life in contemporary, rural India of his time.

R.K Narayan's appeal lies in his blending of satire with humour to present common man caught up in his daily routine and struggles presenting successfully "a fascinating cross-section of life, though with a little variety in treatment."⁹

Some of the other Indian-English short story writers include Ruth Pawar Jhabvala, Khushwant Singh, Bhabani Bhattacharya, Keki Daruwalla, Ruskin Bond, Arun Joshi, Manohar Malgonkar, Upamanyu Chatterjee, Salman Rushdie, Rohinton Mistry, V.S Naipaul, Aravind Adiga, Nayantara Sahgal and Anita Desai. The list provided is however not completely exhaustive.

⁴ Taken from N.D.R Chandra, ed., *Modern Indian Writing in English: Critical Perceptions*, 1st ed., vol. 1. (New Delhi, India: Sarup & Sons, 2004) 23.

⁵ Ibid 23.

⁶ Ibid 23.

⁷ Ibid 25.

⁸ Ibid 25.

⁹ Ibid 26.

Women short story writers have also offered a new perspective to this genre with a heightened level of sensitivity and perception.

Among the above-mentioned list of writers Salman Rushdie, Rohinton Mistry and V.S Naipaul belong to the category of diasporic writers. In its present form the Indian - English short story has come of age, covering within its scope myriad aspects of Indian experience and life, not to forget that the diasporic writer is also vested with the task of presenting the western world to us.

Rohinton's Mistry's writing, focusses largely on his narrative technique, his status as an immigrant writer and the challenges involved therein.

Click on the link below for an interesting discussion on the same subject covered under this section.

<http://yabaluri.org/TRIVENI/CDWEB/indoanglianshortstoryoct2006.htm>

Accessed on 30/12/13 at 9:45 pm.

Mistry's Narrative Technique in the Postmodern World

In the postmodern world of continually shifting and forming boundaries, of the never at once settled contours of time and space, the urge to relocate even through themes and subject matter specifies the very need to belong and construct a "community in the new borderless space."¹⁰ There can yet be a more positive side to this postmodern condition, as not necessarily a destabilized category, but rather as one where "with the destabilization of the fixities of space, place and nation in postmodernity, migrancy, viewed earlier as a condition of loss of home and exile, has come to be a privileged position and the migrant, the quintessential outsider, credited with a double vision."¹¹

This is clearly noticed in Mistry's works too, as besides offering points to negotiate the often unsettled categories of ethnicity, place, race, language and nation that are created through displacement, the writer offers us a double perspective with clarity and precision. He is not unaware of the past and the situations prevailing back home, neither is he unacquainted with his new land, which is now his home. What is offered through Mistry's narratives then is a multilayered text with rich resonances of India as well as Canada through the seamlessly constructed narrative, which despite its shifts in time frames and places is woven in order to give us a holistic experience of the journey that we undertake through his texts. The boundaries that separate places, languages, ethnicities and races then in fact, begin to offer new ways of beginning to approach and negotiate those sharp divides.

In Mistry's writings we get a flavour of the Bombay of the 60's and 70's. Maybe, the emigrant writer doesn't have much of a choice since "the migrant writer in the west, in order to be published or interviewed or even to be read is forced to write only about the country from which he emigrated" thereby vested with the responsibility of helping to "construct an image of the 'Oriental Other'."¹² He does not have the prerogative to write about his newly inhabited country, since it is believed that "she/he is not culturally equipped to do so."¹³

Mistry's role in this multicultural scenario has been succinctly put forth by Spivak where she believes that in his attempt to give voice to the marginalized migrant, Mistry's works seek "to authentically represent the 'nervous' tensions at the root of the hybrid experiences of people 'always on the move', 'always citational in one way or another' ".¹⁴ The anxieties of the immigrant writer are primarily concerned with who would listen to him, i.e., his audience. He is aware that he would speak from his position as a Third

¹⁰ Taken from Anjali Gera Roy & Meena T Pillai, eds., *Rohinton Mistry: An Anthology of Recent Criticism*, 1st ed. (New Delhi, India: Pencraft International, 2007)12.

¹¹ Ibid 12.

¹² Ibid 16.

¹³ Ibid 16.

¹⁴ Taken from Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *The Post-Colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues*, ed. Sarah Harasym (London: Routledge, 1990) 38.

World citizen. The immigrant writer needs to put on the "the intellectual make up"¹⁵ of the English language which is so essential in the white civilization, where he is "confined by a new set of cultural and linguistic codes."¹⁶

Mistry's works draw largely from myth, memories and his present experiences to convey a world rich and resonating with his status as a migrant and also as one who has a colonial inheritance. His narrative style is lucid but as we get engrossed in the text there are many digressions and often concentric circles within the story, one contained within the other. His narrative style is an interesting blend of the modern and traditional one. What we find in Mistry's works is this urge to homogenise and stabilise, to create identity for individuals, who inhabit the space of shifts and geographical dislocations.

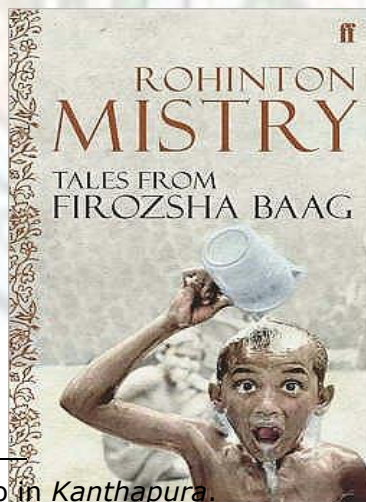
For Mistry, history needs to be probed into and problematized, rather than have people adopt a stance that privileges a mere complacent acceptance of official history as the only reliable version. He considers history as "the medium through which the writer has to journey in order to retrieve individual memories, memories that are as overlapping and anguishing as histories themselves."¹⁷

[Click here](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pqw3Csbmnhg) for Rohinton Mistry's interview.
Accessed on 1/12/13 at 10:42 pm.

Mistry's Literary Oeuvre

Concerns with individual memories and journeys are an integral part of Mistry's fictions, to name his novels we have *Such a Long Journey* (1991), *A Fine Balance* (1995), *Family Matters* (2002) and *The Screem* (2008). This is not to underestimate the scope of his short stories with which he began his literary career, namely *Tales from Firozsha Baag* which was published in 1987 and later published in 1989 as *Swimming Lessons and Other Stories from Firozsha Baag*.

In a novel like *Family Matters*, he exposes the inequalities faced by the Parsi community in India. He brings to the fore, the question of minority status within India and despite the homogenised category of the Indian nation-state there is a clear understanding that there is a differential treatment meted out to the Parsi ethnic community, with the issue of identity being one of significance.



¹⁵ A term used by Raja Rao in *Kanthapura*.

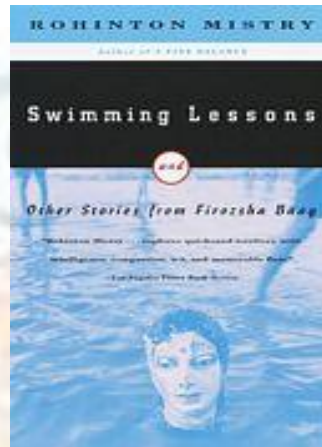
¹⁶ Taken from Anjali Gera Roy & Meena T Pillai, eds., *Rohinton Mistry: An Anthology of Recent Criticism*, 1st ed. (New Delhi, India: Pencraft International, 2007) 17.

¹⁷ Taken from Anjali Gera Roy & Meena T Pillai, eds., *Rohinton Mistry: An Anthology of Recent Criticism*, 1st ed. (New Delhi, India: Pencraft International, 2007) 18.

Picture 2

<http://www.barnesandnoble.com/w/tales-from-firozsha-baag-rohinton-mistry/1007002739>

Accessed on 15/11/2013 at 9:20pm.



Picture 3

<http://www.fictiondb.com/author/rohinton-mistry~swimming-lessons-and-other-stories-from-firozsha-b~206427~b.htm>

Accessed on 15/11/2013 at 9:30pm.

Besides the problems of identity, Mistry's writings are from the standpoint of a postcolonial writer who is involved with the larger agenda of "writing back" to the empire, thereby making his writings a mode of resistance. What is striking there is that, he sticks to the realist technique in grappling with the postcolonial realities with less scope for an experimental mode of writing. But seeing the more positive aspect in this, he also manages to capture every single detail in his works with utmost precision.

The more pertinent question here, despite his use of the realist technique and his political stance really is, whether his writing constitutes a significant kind of literature or not. The answer clearly is yes, for he is well read both in India and the West.

While his success in India is understandable given the fact that India was his homeland, his readership and success in the West is largely because of Western preoccupation with the East. But contrary to what we might expect, here we do not find an exoticization of the East, in this case India, but rather a stereotyping of India as poverty stricken, and often as savage or uncivilized. This kind of a perception of India appeals to western sensibility as it furthers the notion of a progressive West vis a vis the East and clearly here "Mistry's choice of subject matter can be regarded as an indication of complicity in neo-colonial hegemony."¹⁸

The other side of this is that "Mistry's fiction also functions as allegory, and in the process appeals to the West by providing an image of the past."¹⁹ On the whole, however, Mistry is largely appreciated for his writings. His challenge is a daunting one, in being able to express and narrate, as true to life as possible, the life of a community

¹⁸ Taken from Anjali Gera Roy & Meena T Pillai, eds., *Rohinton Mistry: An Anthology of Recent Criticism*, 1st ed. (New Delhi, India: Pencraft International, 2007)37.

¹⁹ Ibid 37. The reason behind this is that "there is in the West a nostalgia for the world reflected in 19th century fiction, and Mistry is very much an inheritor of that tradition." See same book mentioned under this footnote, p 37.

considered marginal in India and lesser known in the West. To be successful at rendering the realities and lives of the Parsi community, he constantly needs to make choices about his use of language, literary style and structure while retaining the uniqueness of their experiences as a community in India. Through his writings, then, Mistry does manage to give them a voice and platform globally, as his works are read all over the world. As Chelva Kanaganayakam mentions, Mistry's "fiction provides a window to the world of a small Parsi community that is isolated, flawed and often beleaguered, but always resilient and unfailingly human."²⁰

Mistry's collection of short stories entitled, "Tales from Firozsha Baag" is a collection of stories that are linked to each other and though they are written in the realistic mode they certainly "display several modes of alternative narrative techniques."²¹ Often the stories are intertextual and there is one larger narrative that contains many stories within its structure. Mistry is able to offer resistance to hegemony through a reappropriation of the master's tongue and an attempt to use that language to convey the less powerful group's immediate experiences, often splashed with words better known and used by the migrant writer. Language by being a means of resistance to the dominant group also becomes empowering in the process.

For our purpose of study let us attempt to understand the last story in this collection, named 'Swimming Lessons', through a detailed analysis of it. This story is linked to the anxieties of an Indian immigrant in Canada to find an identity for himself in the Western space. The story does not merely offer "a psychological journey from one point of awareness to another",²² but also becomes a rich account enmeshed with the lives of other characters, who offer their insights and stories to complete the story with these other, micro-narratives embedded within it.



Picture 4

<http://boingboing.net/2012/06/24/rohinton-mistrys-fairy-tale.html>

Accessed on 17/05/14 at 8:20 pm.

²⁰ Ibid 38.

²¹ Taken from Anjali Gera Roy & Meena T Pillai, eds., *Rohinton Mistry: An Anthology of Recent Criticism*, 1st ed. (New Delhi, India: Pencraft International, 2007)41.

²² Taken from Rohinton Mistry, Introduction, 'Swimming Lessons'. *Interventions: Indian Writing in English*, ed. Anand Prakash. (Delhi & Kolkata, India: Worldview Publications, 2013) 26.

Much-loved Canadian novelist Rohinton Mistry delivered the convocation speech to graduates at Ryerson University in Toronto, in the form of a fairy-tale based on *A Christmas Carol*, by way of a critique of the Canadian swing to a neoconservative right, where social spending exists only to promote "moochers" and society is a fight between bad guys (who need to be surveilled all the time in every medium) and good guys (who don't mind being surveilled in such a way), and where no amount of "security" is ever enough.

Taken from <http://boingboing.net/2012/06/24/rohinton-mistrys-fairy-tale.html>
 Accessed on 17/05/14 at 8:33 pm.

Study and Analysis of 'Swimming Lessons'

"Tales from Firozsha Baag" is a collection of stories written by Kersi Boyce,²³ which are sent to his parents back home in Bombay, India. The last story in this collection, which is the one for our purpose of study is the only one that is set completely in Canada. The first person narrator or protagonist in this story is Kersi, (not referred to here, in this story, by any name) who was born to a Parsi family in Bombay and had later immigrated to Canada. In this sense, the narrative is partly autobiographical, where at times the consciousness of the narrator and the author merge and overlap each other. We also seem to be offered a double perspective of Kersi's (the narrator's) life in Canada, with one that is presented to us by Kersi and the other that is mediated, pondered, reflected upon by his parents and even theorized, at times – this is done mostly by his father.

The narrative at one level is an account of Kersi's life through his own statement of his experiences and life in Canada and at another level we get a perspective of his life from the italicized accounts of his mother and father in India. Issues of alienation for the protagonist in his new land, his sense of displaced identity and nostalgia for his homeland become evident through the italicized content – which becomes a space of dialogue between the parents in their attempt to understand their son's coming to terms with life in Canada. The first person narrator/protagonist's parents usually enter into the dialogue and contemplate on issues pertaining to their son – after receiving a letter from him – often revealing their anticipation and concern for him.

The narrative often shifts between time-zones, to an extent highlighting the constant shifts in time and space that are a recurrent feature of a postmodern work, never entirely located or limited in any one zone. The protagonist's narrative is not merely a mirror to his own life in Canada, but often through the letters that he writes to his parents back home in India as well as the main narrative, journey back to experiences of his life spent in Bombay, before he migrated to Canada. It also attempts to give us an insight to Parsi customs and traditions. At times, the tone seems to be a critique of the Parsi way of life – in broader terms even of his life in Bombay – and at other occasions it highlights the anxiety of unsettlement, shifting as it does between then and now.

The story "serves as a sort of a self-reflexive postscript to the collection as well, a self-critique that pre-empts Parsi annoyance at far from flattering portrayals of the community."²⁴ His references to the Parsi community as having the highest divorce rate in India, the Shiv Sena agitation in Maharashtra, the reminiscing of the Chaupatty beach considered at one time to be "one of the most beautiful beaches in Bombay, [...]. before

²³ Kersi Boyce was "a resident of the Firozsha Baag apartment complex in Bombay and is now settled in Canada" in these stories. Taken from Anjali Gera Roy & Meena T Pillai, eds., *Rohinton Mistry: An Anthology of Recent Criticism*, 1st ed. (New Delhi, India: Pencraft International, 2007)76.

²⁴ Ibid 49.

the filth took over"²⁵ and the sea as a repository "to deposit the leftovers from Parsi religious ceremonies"²⁶ and yet others, far from showing any kind of adulation seem to be a critique of his homeland, at one level.

But this is not always so. His constant returning back to his homeland seems fraught with the urge to re-create his homeland which "is considered to be one of the pre-occupations of the immigrant writer" and is "interpreted as an act of reparation for those immigrants who are tormented by a sense of guilt for having abandoned their homeland."²⁷

The protagonist's parents are elated with the news that their son has become a writer and he gifts them the book that he has written, in a parcel. They take turns to read his stories. The protagonist's mother likes the fact that her son remembers his past so well and puts it all down so beautifully, even the sadder notes, giving it as she feels a semblance of truth, even while he uses his imagination. His father reasons it out by saying that perhaps their son's stories based on his life and experiences in Bombay and as a Parsi outnumber those on Toronto, where he resides at the present point within the story, since it may be too early for him to start narrating his immediate experiences of his life in Toronto. He theorizes that this maybe so because for a writer it takes at least a span of ten years before he can actually internalize that life experience, think about it, time and again and only if it is really valuable "he haunts it and it haunts him".²⁸ To this, his mother says that this only proves the fact that his childhood in Bombay and their home must be the most valuable things in his life, for him to write about it. His father further clarifies that this is not what the theory means, the point being that for a writer to write and deal with the past objectively he must be able to achieve, what is termed as "artistic distance" by critics, where there is no emotional involvement, which he obviously cannot achieve with his more immediate experiences in Toronto.

This is only one kind of justification, the reason maybe apparent in what was discussed in an earlier section where it was made clear how an immigrant may not be considered "culturally equipped" to write about his newly inhabited country. The other side to this may also be plausible that, "writing about homeland is for Mistry no sign of discontent or nostalgia, but simply a journey back to the beginning, to the roots."²⁹ There are many ways of looking at the immigrant's return to his/her roots through his/her writings. The ones cited above are pointers to seeing them within a wider arena of plausibility and debate. While they often contest each other, they make us see things with more clarity and pragmatically, too.

The story is quite suitably titled as, "Swimming Lessons", since for one it "can be interpreted metaphorically to mean learning in the midst of a life-situation."³⁰ The struggle for the protagonist or the first person narrator is one of trying to find a stable

²⁵ Taken from Rohinton Mistry, 'Swimming Lessons'. *Interventions: Indian Writing in English*, ed. Anand Prakash (Delhi & Kolkata, India: Worldview Publications, 2013) 35.

²⁶ Ibid 36.

²⁷ Taken from Anjali Gera Roy & Meena T Pillai, eds., *Rohinton Mistry: An Anthology of Recent Criticism*, 1st ed. (New Delhi, India: Pencraft International, 2007) 77.

²⁸ Taken from Rohinton Mistry, Introduction, 'Swimming Lessons'. *Interventions: Indian Writing in English*, ed. Anand Prakash (Delhi & Kolkata, India: Worldview Publications, 2013) 47.

²⁹ Taken from Anjali Gera Roy & Meena T Pillai, eds., *Rohinton Mistry: An Anthology of Recent Criticism*, 1st ed. (New Delhi, India: Pencraft International, 2007) 77. We could take this point a bit further to corroborate the theory that distance gives to the immigrant a certain degree of objectivity. "Herein lies the vantage point of an immigrant, insinuates Mistry. The immigrant is denied the immediacy of experience, but the distant view of his homeland may help him see it as it really is, better than one who is steeped in its reality." See Ibid 79.

³⁰ Taken from Rohinton Mistry, Introduction, 'Swimming Lessons'. *Interventions: Indian Writing in English*, ed. Anand Prakash (Delhi & Kolkata, India: Worldview Publications, 2013) 27.

ground, despite vacillating so often and shifting within the narrative between Bombay and Canada. Therein lies the problematic for an immigrant. The space becomes symptomatic of his displacement, as he is never entirely settled in one or the other, connected to the past and his roots which he cannot completely relinquish and yet trying to carve a space for himself in his new land, while still being conscious of the fact that he is an immigrant in a space that is not entirely his own. The title in its literal sense is apt too, since the protagonist does enrol himself for swimming lessons in the high school behind his apartment building.

His experience with the woman at the registration desk draws our attention to certain inbuilt racial stereotypes, for the woman presumes that swimming is not encouraged much in India, though the protagonist takes on a defensive stance by considering himself to be "an exception to the rule."³¹ Through his interaction with the woman over swimming lessons the writer is swift at taking it forward through a digression to the issue of never having been able to swim in "the deep blue sea of Chaupatty beach", which he thought "was grey and murky with garbage, too filthy to swim in."³² At this level he manages to pivot the story around something rather central, to help us understand more closely, the significance of the water imagery within the text.

Water is seen as "the universal symbol of life and regeneration"³³ though for the writer it was nothing more than exasperating and frustrating, at most occasions. For him water is a reminder and pointer to many things, a symbol for many ideas within his mind. His memory takes him to the Chaupatty sea reminding him of its filth, something that he had grown quite averse to. In his words, "The sea of Chaupatty was fated to endure the finales of life's everyday functions. It seemed that the dirtier it became, the more crowds it attracted: street urchins and beggars and beachcombers, looking through the junk that washed up."³⁴ The sea also served as a repository for the finales of many a religious festival. He says that, "We used the sea, too, to deposit the leftovers from Parsi religious ceremonies, things such as flowers, or the ashes of the sacred sandalwood fire, which just could not be dumped with the regular garbage but had to be entrusted to the care of Avan Yazad, the guardian of the sea."³⁵ He remembers how when his Grandpa died, his things too were immersed in the sea.

In utter exasperation and of what he views as a hopeless, futile exercise, after a few initial attempts at trying to learn swimming, eventually he abandons the idea completely. He was terrified of the water in the swimming pool and to add to it when he enters the shower before beginning the first class, three young boys emerge spurring out remarks like, "Paki Paki, smells like curry"³⁶ and that "pretty soon all the water's going to taste of curry."³⁷ In this section and later through the references to the inclement weather conditions, the writer exposes the blatant reality that "most immigrants have to face – racism and the bitter Canadian winters" although "Mistry does not record his protagonist's reactions to these racist remarks – of anger or otherwise – at this point or elsewhere in the story."³⁸ Yet, it is understandable to the reader that racism is an inescapable truth for an immigrant from the East.

The failure to learn swimming seems to be symbolic of something larger, though, than it seems at the surface level, which is "the failure of Kersi, and through him of most Parsis, to assimilate in either Indian or Western diasporas."³⁹ It is only towards the end of the

³¹ Ibid 35.

³² Ibid 35.

³³ Ibid 35.

³⁴ Ibid 35-6.

³⁵ Ibid 36.

³⁶ Ibid 39.

³⁷ Ibid 39.

³⁸ Taken from Anjali Gera Roy & Meena T Pillai, eds., *Rohinton Mistry: An Anthology of Recent Criticism*, 1st ed. (New Delhi, India: Pencraft International, 2007)49.

³⁹ Taken from Anjali Gera Roy & Meena T Pillai, eds., *Rohinton Mistry: An Anthology of Recent Criticism*, 1st ed. (New Delhi, India: Pencraft International, 2007) 49.

story that "Kersi is able to open his eyes underwater in the bathtub and see life in a double-perspective – Indian and Western."⁴⁰

There is yet another concern raised within the story. The continued, exasperated efforts at trying to find an identity for oneself in the western world, is also linked to the theme of sexuality. While postcolonial critics consider "colonisation as a rape of the non-West by the West"⁴¹, hereby validating the truth of "the manner in which imperialism saw itself in sexual terms – the male West and the female East"⁴², this theory is evidently proved in "Swimming Lessons" too. For Kersi, the first person narrator in the story, the lure of the West only ends in abated sexuality and disappointment. His view from the upper window in his kitchen, of two women sunbathing despite the earlier provocation it provides him, only ends in sheer disappointment when he later sees them in the elevator with "their wrinkled skin, aging hands, sagging bottoms, varicose veins."⁴³ Later, while he is learning swimming, in his first class a woman, referred to by Kersi as "the pink one-piece suit"⁴⁴ attracts his attention tantalizingly with the pubic hair revealed through her swim-suit, but this experience is only too short-lived for him. Despite the fact that he escapes a close-to-drowning situation, after having volunteered for the last demonstration of the day – by the swimming instructor Ron – he decides to go the next day only too desirous of seeing the "pink one-piece suit" again. Much to his disappointment he sees her and notices that, "The pink Spandex triangle is perfectly streamlined today, nothing strays, not a trace of fuzz, not one filament" as she appears "shorn like the other women in the class."⁴⁵ Seeing the sheer futility of attending any further classes, he gives up the swimming classes completely, in vain.

Through this story the narrator leads us not merely into his own life in India and Canada, but also draws us into the lives of other characters who surround him in Canada, besides revealing to us the discussions of his parents that are italicized evidently as a separate unit spatially – situated as they are in India, while the rest of the narrative largely revolves around his life in Toronto, Canada. Often traces link the story from one sub-story to the other, intertwined as they are with each other, often moving in a concentric manner. For instance, the story of the Old Man in Canada draws us to the story of the narrator's Grandpa, "ostensibly to broaden the thematic base and let the emotion envelop a whole generation across continents."⁴⁶ This technique also enables the writer to cross between time-zones, as much as it often involves crossing over in spatial terms. We get an introduction to the narrator's Grandpa through a comparison that is made between the Old Man and the narrator's Grandpa in the initial section, where he mentions how the Old Man reminds him of his Grandpa the "only difference is, he sits with the stillness of stroke victims, while Grandpa's Parkinson's disease would bounce his thighs and legs and arms all over the place."⁴⁷

The other characters within the story include the Portuguese woman, referred to as PW, who is seen as "the communicator for the apartment building"⁴⁸, her role being that of collecting and disseminating news of any information "when newsworthy events transpire"⁴⁹ in the building. There is Berthe, the building superintendent, a Yugoslavian, who lives with her son and husband. Their life and domestic squabbles become a sub-story within the main narrative. The other sub-stories often meander, returning back to

⁴⁰ Ibid 49.

⁴¹ Ibid 49.

⁴² Ibid 49.

⁴³ Taken from Rohinton Mistry, 'Swimming Lessons'. *Interventions: Indian Writing in English*, ed. Anand Prakash (Delhi & Kolkata, India: Worldview Publications, 2013) 34.

⁴⁴ Ibid 39.

⁴⁵ Ibid 41.

⁴⁶ Ibid, Introduction 28.

⁴⁷ Ibid 30.

⁴⁸ Ibid 31.

⁴⁹ Taken from Rohinton Mistry, 'Swimming Lessons'. *Interventions: Indian Writing in English*, ed. Anand Prakash (Delhi & Kolkata, India: Worldview Publications, 2013) 31.

the narrative on the Old Man, with references to his declining health. In the backdrop of these stories, there is heightened awareness of the changing seasons, of the inclement weather conditions in Canada and the passage of time with Berthe "shovelling the snow off the walkway in the parking lot"⁵⁰ in the bitter, cold winters and the old radiators in the building not working. It is PW who keeps updating the narrator on the Old Man's ill-health and it is through her that he gets to know that the old man had died, leaving the narrator with a question mark when he asked PW "Did you know his name?"⁵¹, for she goes away without answering his question. These stories offer vignettes of life in Canada as seen through the eyes of an immigrant as much as he is a part of life in Canada. The stories seem wrapped within each other, with one story leading on to and uncovering another till we reach the centre, only to realize that in the process these stories "intensify loneliness and sense of vacuity in modern life."⁵²

The stories make us question the search for a stable meaning in life, often highlighting existential moments of despondency and emptiness. This is rather poignantly asserted by Kersi when he says, "Failure to swim through filth must mean something other than failure of rebirth— failure of symbolic death? Does that equal success of symbolic life? death of a symbolic failure? death of a symbol? What is the equation?"⁵³

As much as this seems like a complex mathematical equation, it can be understood in simpler terms. These lines are uttered by him when he completely abandons the idea of pursuing his swimming class, with the sheer disappointment that they had resulted in, as discussed earlier. Here he is comparing the swimming pool with Chaupatty beach and its filth, in that, both had resulted in his failure to swim through them, but with a difference. He says "the swimming pool, like Chaupatty beach, has produced a stillbirth"⁵⁴, for if water symbolizes "regeneration only if it is pure and cleansing"⁵⁵ failure to swim through clear water must equate to "failure of rebirth"⁵⁶ and logically then the "failure of symbolic death"⁵⁷, where rebirth is nothing but symbolic death. This leads us on to logically concur that this must imply through a use of double negative a balanced equation, which can be seen as "success of symbolic life"⁵⁸ or in other words by reversing each again "death of a symbolic failure"⁵⁹ with the obvious play of words and syntax by the writer. Clearly then does this draw the questionable inference of the very "death of a symbol"⁶⁰, for logically "death of a symbolic failure" would mean literally and metaphorically the very "death of the symbol", which ceases to exist and represent anything as a symbol. The equation seems to him only too perplexing and baffling, where seeing it in reductive terms only further increases the angst, sense of hopelessness, futility and vacuity. This attempts to highlight in plain terms, the existential travails of humankind in the modern day world, fraught with an endless search for meaning, but often leading one eventually to only sheer exasperation and cynicism.

⁵⁰ Ibid 45.

⁵¹ Ibid 51.

⁵² Ibid, Introduction 28.

⁵³ Ibid 42.

⁵⁴ Ibid 41-2.

⁵⁵ Ibid 42.

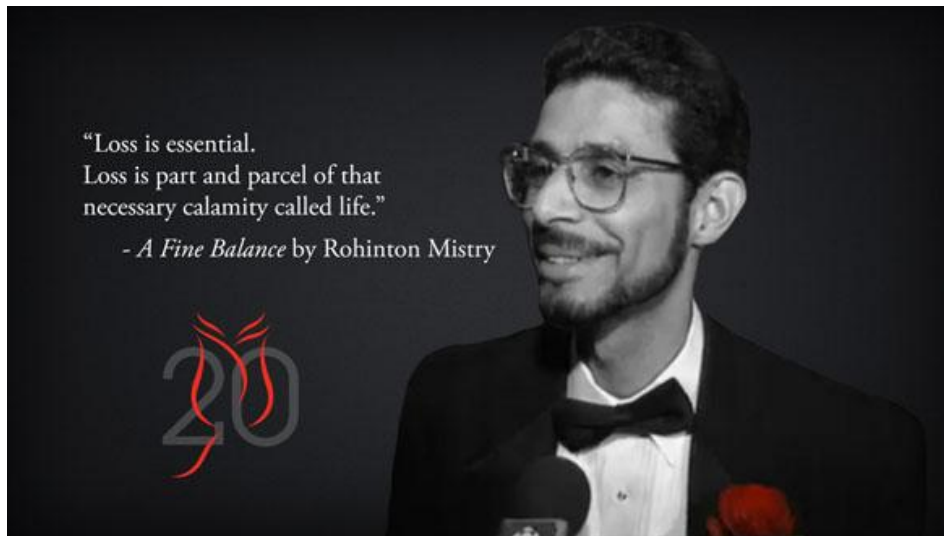
⁵⁶ Ibid 42.

⁵⁷ Ibid 42.

⁵⁸ Ibid 42.

⁵⁹ Taken from Rohinton Mistry, 'Swimming Lessons'. *Interventions: Indian Writing in English*, ed. Anand Prakash (Delhi & Kolkata, India: Worldview Publications, 2013) 42.

⁶⁰ Ibid 42.



Picture 5

<http://www.cbc.ca/books/2013/12/rohinton-mistrys-memoir-in-music-and-words.html>

Accessed on 17/05/14 at 7:30 pm.

Language in "Swimming Lessons"

The language in "Swimming Lessons" has a multi-layered structure, with many voices resonating through the text. It also has a psychological parameter to it, wherein language points to the inner voice of the narrator/protagonist.

At yet another level the language in this text is also very imaginative. The first person narrator in "Swimming Lessons" uses his lively imagination and "with its help he travels back and forth from childhood and adolescence to the mature years."⁶¹ The inner void in the narrator is compensated in the narrator through the many characters and their voices reverberating through the narrative.

In its structure, the language is circular in nature with stories wrapped around stories as we peel off each to reach the core. The character also evolves through the text as he seems to be on a journey which connects him back to his roots as much as it is a psychological journey leading him "from one point of awareness to another."⁶² At the same time, there seems to be a release of his psychological void through the language which oscillates between his original homeland (Bombay, India) and the country to which he has migrated (Canada), shifting as it were between then and now. The use of a language structure which is rich and complex enables us to perceive the two-world perspective which the narrator and through him the author offers to the readers.

Language, must also be understood as a social phenomena since it is the very medium that binds people, communities within a given society or across the world. Here too, we can visibly see it as giving us a diverse view of the character's life in Canada and India. It is his medium of communicating with his parents through their letters written to each other and his means of communicating and surviving in an alien land.

The stories within the text are often "evocatively told in all of three short sentences."⁶³ Here too we must give credit to Mistry in his magnificent art of story-telling, where each story holds up as a mirror to a lived, experienced event narrated in short, terse sentences yet expressed in an evocative language that makes the reader believe it to have happened in a given spatio-temporal frame, with complete veracity. Mistry also uses language to render a sociological representation of the plight of the Parsi

⁶¹ Ibid 27.

⁶² Ibid 26.

⁶³ Ibid 28.

community, a point that was discussed at the very beginning while considering Mistry as a diasporic writer, particularly in the footnote with Nilufer E. Bharucha's tracing of the historical origins of the Parsi community before it settled in India.

Other than these functions of language in "Swimming Lessons", the text has a charm with its colloquial rhythms and its conversational quality which make the entire story and the stories within it give the semblance of a real, lived experience even when narrated. This conversational appeal of the text also merges it with the consciousness of the narrator and very naturally to that of the author, considering that we see the commonalities at many levels between the two. Here too, language fluctuates between conversation and narration, even italicized in the letters exchanged between the narrator and his parents. Besides this, language moves back and forth in time, traversing time zones and geographical spaces to give a wide panorama to the reader. The narrator's inner desires also get articulated through the medium of language in the text.

Thus, it would be worth considering that language holds a mirror to the narrator's life as much as to the many characters whose lives are entwined with the narrator, both in his past and present. Language is clearly the narrator's (and author's) moment of creating an identity for himself as a Parsi immigrant in Canada while simultaneously being a creatively exhilarating moment for them both in their process of becoming a writer.

Summary

After having completed this detailed study of Rohinton Mistry's 'Swimming Lessons', you should now be able to grasp the text better. Beginning with a biographical note on Rohinton Mistry we covered interesting aspects of his life as an immigrant in Canada, the always unsettled terrain of then and now, the search for meaning and acceptance, which are some of the quintessential concerns for an immigrant in the West, especially for one from the East – in Mistry's case the reference is obviously to India. The purpose was also to understand the narrative technique of the writer in the postmodern world, since the writer has to use his pen, keeping in my mind, both the audience in the West and in India that he is addressing. This is not to underestimate the scope of his fiction that is read widely all over the world. After getting a glimpse of his literary oeuvre and the felicitations and awards that he has received for his works, we moved on to a detailed study of 'Swimming Lessons'. Now try to attempt a few questions based on your reading of the text.

Some Questions based on the text:

Qs 1. Discuss if you find 'Swimming Lessons' suitably titled?

Qs 2. Would you consider 'Swimming Lessons' to be a postmodern work of writing in technique and style? If so, why?

Qs 3. How does the main narrative in 'Swimming Lessons' lead on to other stories? Also, what do these other stories in the narrative offer?

Qs 4. Comment on the use of the first person narrator in the story, 'Swimming Lessons'. Is it effective?

Qs 5. Do you think the dialogues between the mother and father give another perspective to the story? How?

Qs 6. 'Swimming Lessons' is as much a description of the narrator's life in Canada as it is a critique in some ways of the Parsi way of living? Do you agree?

Qs 7. What do you understand by the narrator's references to water imagery in the text and his linking it to the concept that "failure to swim through filth must mean something other than failure of rebirth — failure of symbolic death"? Elaborate.

Glossary

1. Alienation: A state of estrangement in feeling or affection.
2. Allegory: a story, play, poem, picture, etc., in which the meaning or message is represented symbolically.
3. Beachcombers: A vagrant who lives by searching beaches for articles of value.
4. Beleaguered: Vexed, harassed.
5. Cynicism: Having little faith in human sincerity etc; scepticism
6. Diaspora: A diaspora (from Greek "scattering, dispersion") is a scattered population with a common origin in a smaller geographic area. The word can also refer to the movement of the population from its original homeland. The word has come to refer particularly to historical mass dispersions of an involuntary nature, such as the expulsion of Jews from Europe, the African Trans-Atlantic slave trade, the southern Chinese during the coolie slave trade, or the century-long exile of the Messenians under Spartan rule. Taken from <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Diaspora>
Accessed on 29/12/13 at 11:45 pm.
7. Eclectic: Deriving ideas, tastes, style, etc., from various sources.
8. Emigrated: To have left one's own country to settle in another.
9. Exasperation: The state of being irritated intensely; infuriated, enraged.
10. Exile: A person expelled or long absent from his or her native country.
11. Exoticization: To make attractively or remarkably strange or unusual; bizarre.
12. Haunts: (of a memory etc.) be persistently in the mind of.
13. Hegemony: The predominant influence, as of a state, region, or group, over another or others. Taken from <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/hegemony>
Accessed on 29/12/13 at 10:55 pm.
14. Holistic: (a.) Emphasizing the importance of the whole and the interdependence of its parts.
(b.) Concerned with wholes rather than analysis or separation into parts. Taken from <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/holistic>
Accessed on 29/12/13 at 10:57 pm.
15. Homogenize: Make or become of the same kind; uniform.
16. Hybrid: Of mixed character; derived from incongruous elements or unlike sources.
17. Immigrated: To have come as a permanent resident to a country other than one's native land.
18. Inclement: (of the weather or climate) severe, esp. cold or stormy.
19. In vain: without result or success.
20. Mediated: Form a connecting link between; be the medium for bringing about (a result) or for conveying (a gift etc.).
21. Metaphorically: something considered as representing or symbolizing another (usu. abstract) thing.
22. Oeuvre: The works of an author, painter, composer, etc., esp. regarded collectively.
23. Parkinson's disease: A progressive disease of the nervous system with tremor, muscular rigidity, and slow, imprecise movement, chiefly affecting middle-aged and elderly people.
24. Plausible: (of an argument, statement, etc.) seeming reasonable or probable.
25. Postmodern: Of or relating to post-modernism. (Post-modernism: A style and concept in the arts, architecture, and criticism, dating from the late 20th century, which represents a departure from modernism and has at its heart a general distrust of grand theories and ideologies as well as a problematical relationship with any notion of 'art'. Typical features include a deliberate mixing of different artistic styles and media, the self-conscious use of earlier styles and conventions, and often the incorporation of

images relating to the consumerism and mass communication of modern post-industrial society.)

26. Postscript: Any additional information, action etc.

27. Pragmatically: Dealing with matters with regard to their practical requirements or consequences.

28. Quintessential: The purest and most perfect, or most typical, form, manifestation, or embodiment of some quality or class.

29. Reappropriation: Reappropriation is the cultural process by which a group reclaims—re-appropriates—terms or artifacts that were previously used in a way disparaging of that group. Taken from <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reappropriation>
Accessed on 29/12/13 at 11:35 pm.

30. Relinquish: Give up or cease from (a habit, plan, belief, etc.).

31. Reparation: The act or an instance of making amends; compensation.

32. Repository: A place where things are stored or may be found; a receptacle.

33. Resilient: (of a person) readily recovering from shock, depression etc.

34. Seamlessly: Perfectly consistent. Taken from
<http://www.thefreedictionary.com/seamlessly>

Accessed on 29/12/13 at 11:40 pm.

35. Self-reflexive: Marked by or making reference to its own artificiality or contrivance. Taken from <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/self-reflexive>

Accessed on 29/12/13 at 11:42 pm.

36. Semblance: The outward or superficial appearance of something; resemblance

37. Shovelling: Shift or clear (coal etc. *here snow*) with or as if with a shovel.

38. Spatial: Of or concerning space.

39. Symptomatic: Serving as a symptom.

40. Syntax: The grammatical arrangement of words, showing their connection and relation.

41. Tantalizingly: Torment or tease by the sight or promise of what is unobtainable; raise and then dash the hopes of; torment with disappointment.

42. Travails: Painful or laborious effort

43. Vacuity: Total absence of matter; emptiness. Taken from
<http://www.thefreedictionary.com/vacuity>

Accessed on 29/12/13 at 11:50 pm.

44. Vested: (foll. by *with*) bestow or confer (powers, authority, etc.) on (a person).

45. Vignettes: In theatrical script writing, sketch stories, and poetry, a vignette is a short impressionistic scene that focuses on one moment or gives a trenchant impression about a character, idea, setting, or object. This type of scene is more common in recent postmodern theater, where less emphasis is placed on adhering to the conventions of theatrical structure and story development. Vignettes have been particularly influenced by contemporary notions of a scene as shown in film, video and television scripting. Taken from [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vignette_\(literature\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vignette_(literature))

Accessed on 29/12/13 at 11:55 pm.

Works Cited

For Glossary:

Oxford English Reference Dictionary. First Indian edn. 2008.

Books referred to:

Chandra, N.D.R., ed., *Modern Indian Writing in English: Critical Perceptions*. 1st ed.
Vol. 1. New Delhi, India: Sarup & Sons, 2004.

Mistry, Rohinton. 'Swimming Lessons'. *Interventions: Indian Writing in English*. Ed. Anand Prakash. Delhi & Kolkata, India: Worldview Publications, 2013.

Roy, Anjali Gera., and Pillai Meena T., eds. *Rohinton Mistry: An Anthology of Recent Criticism*. 1st ed. New Delhi, India: Pencraft International, 2007.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. *The Post-Colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues*. Ed. Sarah Harasym. London: Routledge, 1990.

Links for Online References:

1. <http://postcolonialstudies.emory.edu/rohinton-mistry/>
Accessed on 1/12/13 at 9:20 pm.
2. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Diaspora>
Accessed on 29/12/13 at 11:45 pm.
3. <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/hegemony>
Accessed on 29/12/13 at 10:55 pm.
4. <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/holistic>
Accessed on 29/12/13 at 10:57 pm.
5. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reappropriation>
Accessed on 29/12/13 at 11:35 pm.
6. <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/seamlessly>
Accessed on 29/12/13 at 11:40 pm.
7. <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/self-reflexive>
Accessed on 29/12/13 at 11:42 pm.
8. <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/vacuity>
Accessed on 29/12/13 at 11:50 pm.
9. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vignette_\(literature\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vignette_(literature))
Accessed on 29/12/13 at 11:55 pm.
10. <http://yabaluri.org/TRIVENI/CDWEB/indoanglianshortstoryoct2006.htm>
Accessed on 30/12/13 at 9:45 pm.

Links for Pictures:

Picture 1

<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/mar/30/rohinton-mistry-profile>
Accessed on 15/11/2013 at 9:25pm.

Picture 2

<http://www.barnesandnoble.com/w/tales-from-firozsha-baag-rohinton-mistry/1007002739>
Accessed on 15/11/2013 at 9:20pm.

Picture 3

<http://www.fictiondb.com/author/rohinton-mistry~swimming-lessons-and-other-stories-from-firozsha-b~206427~b.htm>
Accessed on 15/11/2013 at 9:30pm.

Picture 4

<http://boingboing.net/2012/06/24/rohinton-mistrys-fairy-tale.html>

Accessed on 17/05/14 at 8:20 pm.

Picture 5

<http://www.cbc.ca/books/2013/12/rohinton-mistrys-memoir-in-music-and-words.html>

Accessed on 17/05/14 at 7:30 pm.

Links for Video:

1. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pqw3Csbnhg>

Accessed on 1/12/13 at 10:42 pm.

