

The Philosophy of Autobiographical Memory and Collective Memory in Rohinton Mistry's "Swimming Lessons"

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Abstract

Diasporic writing depicts the experience of immigrants, the feeling of nostalgia and the quest for identity through different narrative techniques. One such technique is comparing the past experiences with the present. This technique helps the writer to stay connected with his/her homeland. Rohinton Mistry, an Indian- Canadian writer, skilfully delineates the narrator's feeling of nostalgia and sense of belonging by narrating his past experiences in the short story "Swimming Lessons". The narrator Kersi Boyce in "Swimming Lessons" describes his childhood days in Firozsha Baag reflecting his connection with the past. Some of his experiences as an immigrant in Canada prompt him to contemplate his cultural and societal roots. Past memories of Kersi Boyce is used as a tool to express the dilemma of acceptance and assimilation. This paper aims to demonstrate the impact of autobiographical memory and collective memory in tracing the experiences of immigrants.

Keywords

Autobiographical memory, Collective memory, Lifetime periods, General events, Specific events.

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Human beings are usually captivated by the past. The life of every individual revolves around the memories created in the past. Memories act as a driving force to influence the present and future happenings in one's life. An individual cannot escape from the clutches of the past memories, it is mandatory that everyone should accept the present with traces of the past. In particular, immigrants are the ones who are most affected by the past memories. Immigrants leaving their homeland due to various reasons face numerous problems in a new country. They feel alienated and tend to suffer from an identity crisis. Immigrants feel that they should assimilate into the culture of the country where they get settled. Few immigrants use letters, diaries, short stories, and novels as a tool to express their feelings and emotions, later these immigrants become popular diasporic writers. One such writer is Rohinton Mistry. He is an Indian born Canadian writer, obtained a degree in mathematics and economics from the University of Bombay. In 1975, he moved to Canada and started to write novels and short stories expressing the love for his homeland.

Mistry belongs to the Parsi community of Mumbai. His writings are well-endowed with aspects related to the traditional and cultural norms followed by the Parsis (The descendants from Persia who migrated to India due to religious conflicts with Muslims during the 8th century). "Swimming Lessons" is a short story from Mistry's *Tales From Firozsha Baag* (1987), this collection of short stories was short listed for the Governor General's Award in 1988. The short story "Swimming Lessons" is about Kersi Boyce, an immigrant

settled in Canada. Boyce's parents think that their son is working as a clerk in an insurance company in Toronto, but later they come to know that Boyce has written a book of short stories and they feel happy for him. Boyce's short stories are reminiscence of his childhood days. "Swimming Lessons" based on cultural differences uses memory as a tool to express the narrator's (Boyce) childhood experience and to explore the ethnic traits of Parsis. The autobiographical memory and collective memory is used in "Swimming Lessons" to depict the cultural background of Mistry. The narrator Kersi Boyce is a reflection of Mistry, he narrates the whole story with memories related to his past experiences in Mumbai.

The autobiographical memory is based on an individual's personal experiences, it denotes the relationship an individual has with the objects, people or events in the past. Francis Galton, a British anthropologist and eugenicist is considered to be the founding father of the philosophy of autobiographical memory. Autobiographical memory operates at three levels and these levels can be traced in the short story "Swimming Lessons". The first level is termed as lifetime periods, this level denotes the past happenings that occurred over a long period of time and these events can have a huge impact in representing the present. Kersi Boyce tries to connect his present with the past through the first level of autobiographical memory.

He reminds me of Grandpa as he sits on the sofa in the lobby, staring out vacantly at the parking lot. Only difference is, he sits with the stillness of stroke victims, while Grandpa's Parkinson's disease Grandpa took to sitting on

the veranda and staring emptily at the traffic passing outside Firozsha Baag. (Mistry 230)

Kersi Boyce relates his grandpa and his mother to the old man and his daughter living in his apartment in Toronto. During his childhood days, Boyce has witnessed his mother taking care of his grandpa because his grandpa suffered from Parkinson's disease. At present, whenever Boyce notices the old man residing in his apartment, he just thinks about his grandpa. Boyce also traces a chain of events occurred in the past and he tries connect himself with the people of Firozsha Baag. Lifetime periods traces the features of location and events occurred in a specific period. Therefore Boyce trying to connect his present with the memories related to Firozsha Baag denotes his childhood days in Firozsha Baag.

The second level is termed as general events. An individual remembering any event that occurred for few days or few months can be categorized under general events. General events have a common theme and they represent occasions and ceremonies. Boyce in "Swimming Lessons" mentions Ganesh Chaturthi, the religious festival which fascinated him during his childhood days. Boyce says, "On Ganesh Chaturthi, clay idols of the god Ganesh, adorned with garlands and all manner of finery were carried in processions The music got more frenzied the closer the procession got to Chaupatty" (Mistry 234). At present in Canada, Boyce regularly attends swimming classes to enhance his swimming skills and mingle with people of different cultures. So, whenever he goes to the swimming pool he remembers the Chaupatty beach in Mumbai, he remembers how swimming seemed as a night mare during his childhood days. Then he remembers the festival Ganesh Chaturthi and its rituals. At the beginning, it seems like Boyce was fascinated by Ganesh Chaturthi, but later his narration proves that religious rituals performed during Ganesh Chaturthi or any other Parsi festivals was the root cause of dirt and filth in Chaupatty. Mistry never blames the religious rituals, but his narration shows his aversion towards people polluting the environment in the name of religion. Mistry uses Boyce's narration as tool to show both the negative and positive aspects of religious ceremonies. Boyce's narration about Ganesh Chaturthi and its drawbacks can be considered as the second level of autobiographical memory.

Specific events represent the third level of autobiographical memory. Specific memory denotes any event that occurred for few hours or few minutes, but specific events are the most crucial ones in making a huge impact in an individual's present life. "But my main concern was the little guttersnipes, like naked fish, taunting me with their skills swimming under water and emerging all around me" (Mistry 235). These lines have minute details and imageries that explain the major cause behind Boyce's agitation towards swimming. During his childhood days, Boyce's main concern was the little sea urchins. Sea Urchins made him feel agitated as a result of which he was not interested to learn swimming. This specific event played a major role in Boyce's life, and at present Boyce learns swimming thinking about the sea urchins that taunted

him during his childhood days.

The term collective memory was coined by Hugo Van Hofmannsthal, a poet, novelist, and librettist from Australia, but the French sociologist Halbwachs is considered to be the father of collective memory. Collective memory represents the identity of a social group or community. Memory representing the values, narratives, ethics, and rituals performed by a specific community constructs collective memory. It differs from history because unlike history it focuses on the perspective of single social group or community. According to Kansteiner, "Collective memory is not history, though it is sometimes made from similar material. It is a collective phenomenon . . . it often privileges the interests of the contemporary" (180). In "Swimming Lessons", Mistry has used collective memory as a tool to represent the cultural and social background of Parsis. Kersi Boyce usually posts his short story collections to his parents residing in Mumbai, after reading those stories Boyce's father feels that majority of the stories portray Parsis as people belonging to middle class society, so he utters the following lines to Boyce's mother. but there should also have been something positive about Parsis, there was so much to be proud of: the great Tatas and their contribution to the steel industry, or Sir Dinshaw Petit in the textile industry who made Bombay the Manchester of the east. . . . Parsis had a reputation for being generous and family oriented. (Mistry 245)

The above lines from "Swimming Lessons" focus on the constructive and productive side of Parsis. Mistry portrays the Parsis to be the most advanced and intelligent people. Parsis are represented as the descendants of magnificent Persian Empire. In the remaining stories, Mistry has focused on the characterization of people in Firozsha Baag and those stories were reflection of what he witnessed in the past, but in "Swimming Lessons", Mistry has used Boyce's father to narrate the actual history of Parsis and the broad mind set of the Parsis who are the descendants of the great Persian Empire, so the collective memory is used potentially to preserve the past and to create a self-image by connecting the contemporary Parsis to their great grandfathers.

The research article aims to demonstrate the connection between memory studies and the writings of diasporic writers. Usually diasporic writers use their novels or short stories as a vehicle to represent their past. In "Swimming Lessons", past memories of Kersi Boyce is used throughout the story to express the dilemma of acceptance and assimilation. The researcher feels that Mistry has not only present the image of a struggling immigrant, but he has also skilfully made Boyce as his own reflection to delineate the struggle faced by an immigrant writer. The autobiographical memory and collective memory is used in "Swimming Lessons", to represent the writer's quest for identity and to make his culture and rituals valued by everyone. In future, the philosophy of autobiographical memory and collective memory can be used to know how an individual's identity can be drawn from multiple global sources and how one's values and ethics are drawn from multiple backgrounds.

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