

# THE PROCESS OF LITERARY CREATION ACROSS CULTURAL BORDERS

a reading of rohinton mistry's "Swimming lessons"

## O PROCESSO DE CRIAÇÃO LITERÁRIA ATRAVÉS DAS FRONTEIRAS CULTURAIS: UMA LEITURA DE "SWIMMING LESSONS," DE ROHINTON MISTRY

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### ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to consider the process of literary creation as recreated by the Indian author Rohinton Mistry in his short story "Swimming lessons." The dislocation of the main character from India to Canada allows him to turn his memories into fictional material and cross cultural borders. Literature is thus turned into a space of reflection which allows him to makes sense of his own experience in the diaspora.

### KEYWORDS

Literary creation, cultural dislocation, cultural identity

### INTRODUCTION

In this paper I propose to discuss the process of literary creation from a cross cultural perspective through a reading of the short story "Swimming lessons" by Rohinton Mistry. The singularity of his writing, to borrow a term from Derek Attridge (2004), is articulated in the fact that geographical dislocation is turned into artistic distance as the young writer's Indian memories intertwine with his Canadian experiences to become a sea of stories, which allows him to swim across cultural borders. Literature thus becomes the realm through which he can make sense of his own experience.

This story can be read as an example of cultural translation. Mignolo<sup>1</sup> explains that cultural translation is more than a syntactic and semantic transaction between two languages. It implies both a geopolitical as well as a historical configuration because

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<sup>1</sup> MIGNOLO. Beyond dichotomies: translation/transculturation and the colonial difference, p. 1.

it has not only a linguistic logic but also a historical memory deeply rooted in the subjectivity of the individual. Cultural translation or transculturation thus becomes a working concept to think and understand cultural, political and social relationships in a transnational world, such as the one proposed by Mistry in this short story.

“Swimming lessons” is the last story in the collection *Tales from Firozsha Baag* (1989) that made of Mistry an internationally acclaimed writer. The stories, written in Toronto, Canada, indirectly tell about Mistry’s own beginnings as a writer. The narratives can be divided into three groups. The first ones tell about life in the building compound of Firozsha Baag in Bombay, with the fun and tenderness that childhood stories evoke, but also with the critical harshness that distinguish Mistry’s writing about India, since he problematizes the element of the exotic associated with Indian Literature in English. Then, the story “Lend Me Your Light,” that belongs to the second group of narratives, tells about the moment of actually crossing the ocean and starting a new life in Canada, when the young immigrant’s burden of “riddles and puzzles” about life in India is still unsolved. He presents himself as a “Tiresias, throbbing between two lives, humbled by the ambiguities and dichotomies confronting him”;<sup>2</sup> this implies neither idealizing nor brutalizing life in India, from a Western perspective, but learning to see it in all its difficulties and complexities.

The last story of the collection “Swimming lessons,” which belongs to the last group of narratives, takes place in Canada, in another building compound, and as its name reveals, its narrator-cum-writer tells how, through the power of narratives, he learnt to swim across cultural borders and find answers to some of his riddles. Among his new neighbors from different parts of the world – a Portuguese lady and a Yugoslavian superintendant – he learns to narrate, with great compassion, about, his own community back in Bombay, the Parsis. Like his new neighbors, the Parsis had had to flee from Iran because of religious discrimination, and later suffered from political intolerance in Post-Independence India, during the government of Indira Gandhi. The locus of enunciation of Mistry’s narratives is thus twice removed from the center: for being Indian and for belonging to a cultural minority within the subcontinent.

The story depicts the process of change in the narrator’s cultural identity. As it has happened with many other post-colonial Indian writers in English, living in the diaspora allows Mistry to “give imaginative form to [his] dislocated worlds”.<sup>3</sup> Hence, the story also shows how he transforms himself from a postcolonial subject into a literary celebrity,<sup>4</sup> and through his writing he contributes to reformulate the way in which the literary will come to be understood from a post-colonial perspective.

### SWIMMING, WRITING AND LIVING ACROSS BORDERS

“Swimming lessons” is told by a first person narrator. This seems to be a very innocuous and straightforward narrative vehicle. However, in the case of a post-colonial narrative it

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<sup>2</sup> MISTRY. *Swimming lessons*, p. 180.

<sup>3</sup> BOEHMER. *Colonial and postcolonial literature*. Migrant metaphors, p. 234.

<sup>4</sup> GHOSH. *When borne across*, p. 20.

can be turned into a more complex narrative strategy because to describe events from a vantage point necessarily implies invoking a society, a cultural context.<sup>5</sup> And this is a key issue in “Swimming lessons” since the story is being told precisely at the moment when the narrator, an Indian immigrant, is culturally dislocated, divided between his home country and his country of adoption. Being far from the first one and on the margins of the second, the narrator wavers between his desire to go out into the new community and his own apprehensions at doing so, fact that leads him to recoil upon himself to muse about his new condition. His new situation, then, is highly propitious for literary creation.

Through the use of what Fraser<sup>6</sup> calls the “didactic present” the narrator broods on how the nuances of his present life affect him. At the same time, this use of the present, through which he articulates his views and feelings about Toronto, triggers memories of his past life in India. This episode lends to the narrative a fragmented quality that actually stands for the narrator’s mind, divided between his present and past life. As Boehmer<sup>7</sup> explains, in migrant writers’ narratives fragmentation does not mean “distance from the world” but connection, “a commitment to uniting what colonialism had put asunder, emphasizing how the experience of one has for so long been bound up in that of the other”. As the narrative progresses, both cultural spaces become intertwined in the telling, revealing the narrator’s newly born artistic consciousness..

This narrative develops from the curt letters he sends to his parents back home interspersed with anecdotes about his new building compound and the swimming lessons he has decided to take up at a high school in his neighborhood. The counterpoint between the letters and his parents’ reading dramatizes the relationship between writer, critic and artistic production, offering the reader its theory of reading and interpretation, and lending to the narrative a marked metaliterary quality that reveals the agency implied in the discourse of literature. As Frow<sup>8</sup> points out, through “[its] generic organization of language, images, gestures and sounds, literature makes things happen by actively shaping the way we understand the world.”

In the beginning, the perfunctory quality of his letters, limited to empty remarks about the weather and the apartment where he lives, leads his father to reflect that “everything about his life is locked in silence and secrecy”,<sup>9</sup> as he seems to have nothing to say about his new situation. His letter’s silence, however, hides the series of difficulties he stumbles upon as he tries, on the one hand, to elbow his way into the, at times, hostile Canadian landscape and, on the other, reconcile himself to his Indian memories. But it is out of this painful process that he will find a voice to define his new cultural identity in his new environment.

As part of this process, he decides to take up swimming lessons in order to accomplish something he had left unfinished in Bombay between “the devil and the

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<sup>5</sup> FRASER. *Colonial and postcolonial literature*. Migrant metaphors, p. 67.

<sup>6</sup> FRASER. *Lifting the sentence*. A poetics of postcolonial fiction, p. 112.

<sup>7</sup> BOEHMER. *Colonial and postcolonial literature*. Migrant metaphors, p. 234.

<sup>8</sup> FROW. *Genre*, p. 2.

<sup>9</sup> MISTRY. *Swimming lessons*, p. 231.

deep blue sea,”<sup>10</sup> the first being the lack of money and the second the filth of the Indian beaches: “Chaupatty beach... grey and murky with garbage, too filthy to swim in.”<sup>11</sup> Canada seems highly promissory to avoid Indian poverty and dirt.

Little by little, the letters become fragments of short stories that reveal the heuristic process that is taking place as the narrator struggles to cross the cultural borders. The fact that he is engrossed in his own predicament, however, should not be read as a narcissistic attitude. Rather, his private narrative is deeply connected with the realm of the public and it should be seen as an attempt to understand his situation, astride two cultures.

The discourse of literature is presented as highly functional in the story because its structuring effects, as Frow<sup>12</sup> explains, “are productive of meaning” or better, “act as an organizing principle in a moment of change”. This quality of the literary discourse is pointedly so in the case of post-colonial narratives because by focusing on the gap between discourse and place, they become an “investigation into the means of knowing rather than into what is, or can be, known”.<sup>13</sup>

The short story thus becomes the condition for the creation of meanings and values that will allow the narrator to make sense of his new situation. In this context, water and swimming function as the symbols through which he relates the two communities, Bombay and Toronto, and can narrate the transcendental experience of swimming across national borders. As he himself reflects: “Water image in my life is recurring. Chaupatty 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 that failure.”<sup>14</sup>

The regenerating power of the water image is evocative of his own condition, as he is being borne into a new life; it also echoes one of the central symbols in Canadian literature that, according to Margaret Atwood,<sup>15</sup> is “the idea of survival: physical, mental or spiritual”, when confronted with difference. And this is actually the narrator’s plight in his Canadian environment and the reason why he has decided to take up the swimming lessons: his desire to integrate himself to the new culture.

Little by little the reflections about water and swimming acquire a metaliterary tone as they become an afterthought on the process of writing:

When images and symbols abound in this manner, sprawling or rolling across the page without guile or artifice, one is prone to say, how obvious, how skillless; symbols, after all, should be still and gentle as dewdrops, tiny, yet, shining with a world of meaning.<sup>16</sup>

It is the obvious symbol on the page, water signifying life, that aids him in his crossing of another border, the one between fiction and reality. So he comes to reflect on water as inscribed on the page of life: “But what happens when on the page of life

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<sup>10</sup> MISTRY. *Swimming lessons*, p. 234.

<sup>11</sup> MISTRY. *Swimming lessons*, p. 234.

<sup>12</sup> FROW. *Genre*, p. 2.

<sup>13</sup> ASHCROFT. *The empire writes back*, p. 137.

<sup>14</sup> MISTRY. *Swimming lessons*, p. 234.

<sup>15</sup> In FRASER. *Lifting the sentence. A poetics of postcolonial fiction*, p. 152.

<sup>16</sup> MISTRY. *Swimming lessons*, p. 234.

itself, one encounters the ever-moving, all-engirdling sprawl of the filthy sea?”<sup>17</sup> Apparently only story-tellers seem to have the key to this mystery, as he muses recalling his life in Bombay: “Dewdrops and oceans both have their rightful place. Nariman Hansotia certainly knew that when he told his stories to the boys of Firozsha Baag.”<sup>18</sup>

In his desire to decode life’s riddles, the swimming lessons become the objective correlative for writing itself, his main channel of expression in this rite of passage. In turn, his own narratives will allow him to cross the cultural expanse that, like the deep blue sea, unites and separates peoples and nations. The crossing, however, proves to be a rough and tumble one because of the “physically and socially painful experience of migrancy.”<sup>19</sup>

One of the *leitmotifs* of the story, and of his own cultural crossing, is his desire to find the connection between causes and effects in life; his queries are posed at different moments of his learning process, as he tries to find the right place “for dewdrops and oceans.” One such emblematic moment would be when he tries to understand why his first swimming lesson in Canada had become a terrifying experience. Another, when an aging neighbor in the building compound in Toronto actually teaches him the secret of swimming and, indirectly, teaches him the secret of living. If through the first one he fleshes the controversial theme of migrancy, through the second he learns that compassion knows no cultural borders. Therefore, if at times he can smirk at his neighbors both in Firozsha Baag and Toronto for their shortcomings, he can also aim his critique at himself for his own foibles.

As already suggested, his relationship with Canada is marked by fear and desire. Desire is represented by his fantasy of meeting a gorgeous woman at the swimming pool; instead, he meets a “plain looking one,” but she makes do for his fantasy and he is able to “practice floating and paddling in the swimming pool.” However, his moment of contentment becomes a moment of fear when his instructor leads the class to the deep end of the pool: fifteen feet of water where he starts “swallowing water and floundering” hanging on to the instructor’s hoop. Though the practice is perfectly safe, he decides to give up his swimming lessons on grounds of racial discrimination: “The instructor is an irresponsible person. Or he does not value the lives of non-white immigrants.”<sup>20</sup>

What had actually triggered his fear and reaction had not been his instructor’s attitude, but his encounter with three Canadian boys in the locker room before the lesson that had pointed out to him his own ethnic marginality. In a typical line, with colonial overtones, one of them had held his nose, while the second had sung “Paki, Paki, smells like curry” and the third had added, “pretty soon all the water’s going to taste like curry.”<sup>21</sup>

The swimming lesson is thus turned into a terrifying cultural experience that will translate the events on the page of life into literature and will lead him to direct his look upon himself. If one of the main tropes of post-colonial writing is the ability or the need to

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<sup>17</sup> MISTRY. *Swimming lessons*, p. 234.

<sup>18</sup> MISTRY. *Swimming lessons*, p. 234.

<sup>19</sup> GHOSH. *When borne across*, p. 15.

<sup>20</sup> MISTRY. *Swimming lessons*, p. 239.

<sup>21</sup> MISTRY. *Swimming lessons*, p. 238.

write across borders, what marks its singularity, as Mistry hints at time and again in the narrative, is the confusion produced by the actual crossing as it alters the relationship between causes and effects. As the narrator ironically says at one point: “The Parsi community has the highest divorce rate in India. It also claims to be the most westernized community in India. Which is the result of other? Confusion again, of cause and effect.”<sup>22</sup>

It is this condition that actually fosters his writing. One of the recurring memories from the narrator’s past, which fills him with guilt and remorse, is his grandfather’s illness and death. While the old man had been at the hospital, he had only been to see him just once, at his mother’s insistence. What evokes this vision is the image of his old ailing neighbor, who lives by himself, “creaking by in the hallway”<sup>23</sup> in his wheel chair. His awakened sensitivity helps him reconsider his family memories and see them from a new perspective, as the image of both men becomes intertwined in his narrative.

It is actually the old man, whose name he does not even know, who teaches him the secret of swimming and living, when one day he meets him in the corridor “facing the bare wall because he had seen all there was to see outside and it was time to see inside.”<sup>24</sup> Following his example, one day he fills up his bathtub, submerges his head under water and opens his eyes. As he reflects, the “world outside the water I have seen a lot of, it is now time to see what is inside.”<sup>25</sup>

He then takes a bath in his own “dirt,” his own “grey and murky water”; in other words, he turns a critical eye upon himself. This is the actual moment of crossing that allows him to reconsider “the psychic trauma of migration”<sup>26</sup> and find the right balance between ocean and dewdrops. As a result, he can dive into his own narrative flow. And his best story is written.

His mother, reading his book of stories back in India tells her husband, “How can you be so sure that he is remembering because he is a writer, or whether he started to write because he is unhappy and thinks of the past, and wants to save it all by making stories of it?”<sup>27</sup> She gets lost trying to find the right order of causes and effects. However, the answer is given by the story itself. In it, the refracted image of his dying grandfather is re-enacted through the story of his dying neighbour. The moment he can relate both images, he associates India and Canada, past time with present place through a common metaphor of death and life, as he tells the story of one from the perspective of the other, unceasingly rewriting any possible hierarchy of cause and effect.

The story finishes with a reflection on literary theories and a writer’s poetics as discussed by his mother, the emotional reader and his father, the intellectual one, but this time through a new question: What is fact and what is fiction? What moves his mother is the part of the narrative when he wonders whether his grandpa is actually watching and blessing him, because this is what she had told him when he had refused

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<sup>22</sup> MISTRY. *Swimming lessons*, p. 230.

<sup>23</sup> MISTRY. *Swimming lessons*, p. 231.

<sup>24</sup> MISTRY. *Swimming lessons*, p. 248.

<sup>25</sup> MISTRY. *Swimming lessons*, p. 249.

<sup>26</sup> GHOSH. *When borne across*, p. 15.

<sup>27</sup> MISTRY. *Swimming lessons*, p. 243.

to see the old man in the hospital. For the father, on the other hand, what matters is not whether what he tells is true or not but that “he writes it all so beautifully that it seems true.”<sup>28</sup> And this, in my opinion, is the moment of consecration in the story. His father, a Parsi like himself, from inside the Indian community, declares it beautiful because, unlike many other Indian narratives in English, India is not exoticized for Western consumerism. Rather, it is presented in all its cultural complexity.

Impersonating the father’s voice, and with a tint of sarcasm, the narrator dwells on the topic of how literary creation happens, how facts and fictions connect, this being the ultimate relationship of cause and effect questioned by Mistry’s writing, in this first person narrative which allows him to contrast two worlds with great acuteness, resulting, perhaps, from the fact that at this point, he belongs to both of them or neither of them. He makes the character of the father say that

fiction does not create facts, fiction can come from facts, it can grow out of facts by compounding, transposing, augmenting, diminishing, or altering them in any way; but you must not confuse cause and effect, you must not confuse what really happened with what the story says happened, you must not loosen your grasp on reality, that way madness lies.<sup>29</sup>

Maybe the relationship between fact and fiction is a bit more complicated than that and it might be argued that facts also come out of fictions, as the narrator’s own story comes to attest. After fictionalizing both old men, he becomes reconciled to the memories of his grandfather and, thus, solves one of the many riddles and puzzles he had brought along from India.

But, perhaps, the most relevant issue posed by the story is what happens to the process of literary creation in a foreign environment, when trying to resignify the “home” from the “world,” when one’s identity is being questioned across geographical and cultural boundaries. As the story twice suggests, in the father’s last words and the narrator’s terrifying episode before the swimming lesson, the intercultural experience might lead the person to lose his grip on reality. In this context, writing becomes foremost because it allows the displaced subject to find a new order in the confusion, something that Mistry succeeds in doing because what makes his story so true and beautiful, to answer his character’s question, is the fact that he finds his way across cultural borders when he writes a story about one culture from the perspective of the other.

In this process, cultural difference becomes the main trope of these narrative; as his father points out: “they are interested there in reading about life through the eyes of an immigrant, it provides a different viewpoint.”<sup>30</sup> What worries his father, however, is the danger that “if he changes and becomes so much like them that he will write like one of them, [he will] lose the importance of difference,”<sup>31</sup> or, as it has been repeatedly argued, he might become less authentic, in other words, less exotic in Western eyes and lose his grip on reality.

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<sup>28</sup> MISTRY. *Swimming lessons*, p. 249.

<sup>29</sup> MISTRY. *Swimming lessons*, p. 250.

<sup>30</sup> MISTRY. *Swimming lessons*, p. 248.

<sup>31</sup> MISTRY. *Swimming lessons*, p. 248.

However, distance in Mistry works differently and this is why he has been defined as a cosmopolitical writer.<sup>32</sup> First, rather than aestheticizing his country, he presents it in a very harsh light. And this is why his father, a Parsi like himself, qualifies his writing as beautiful. It has nothing of the exotic quality so welcomed by Western audiences. Second, he does not do away with cultural difference because he gets lost in a sea of new experiences. Rather, distance helps him see India in perspective and, more than that, it also helps him see himself and his own attitudes from a critical angle, as the very telling metaphor of swimming in one's own dirt shows. If in Bombay he had seen the sea as being dirtied by the others and, therefore, he and his mother had refused to enter it, now it was the others who saw him as producing dirt and soiling their clean swimming pools. In the same fashion, it had been the humanity of an old man in his country of adoption that had allowed him to become reconciled with his memories of home.

What marks the narrator's difference, then, is the fact that while he can reflect on his own attitude, the young boys at the pool, apparently, cannot. The narrator's reflexive quality can thus be read as a rupture in the policy of representation that tends to see the immigrant just as a victim, disregarding his own attitude to the Other back home, or considering home as the only authentic place.

It is precisely the ability to focus on a conflict from an alternative perspective, which helps deconstruct stereotypes, that differentiates Mistry from other "Indian writers in English." He is one of those writers who "quite reflexively manipulates the terms of [his] own popular circulation through linguistic praxes and the staging of epistemological difference."<sup>33</sup>

## FINAL REMARKS

As we have seen in this reading of "Swimming lessons," Mistry discusses the moment when his Indian identity is being borne into literature across cultural and geographical boundaries, the moment when he turns a critical eye not only upon others, but also upon himself. In so doing, as Ghosh also points out, his aesthetic choices reveal a political agenda that marks the quality of his writings and, by extension, reveal the post-colonial narrative as a privileged locus of enunciation to investigate the means of knowing through its discussion of the relationship between narrative and cultural space<sup>34</sup>. Writing thus becomes the realm through which the post-colonial writer sets out on a journey urged by his fear of loss of selfhood and cultural disorientation and struggles to become reconciled with his inherited values and overcome his sense of alienation in the new culture.



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<sup>32</sup> GHOSH. *When Borne across*, p. 184.

<sup>33</sup> GHOSH. *When Borne across*, p. 184.

<sup>34</sup> GHOSH. *When Borne Across*, p. 184.



## RESUMO

O objetivo deste artigo é considerar o processo de criação literária, conforme recriado pelo escritor Rohinton Mistry, em seu conto "Swimming lessons". O deslocamento da personagem principal da Índia para o Canadá lhe permite transformar suas memórias do lar em tema de ficção e assim cruzar fronteiras culturais. Desta maneira, a literatura torna-se um espaço de reflexão no qual a personagem pode considerar a sua situação na diáspora.

## PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Criação literária, deslocamento cultural, identidade cultural

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