

# Cricket Matters

## The English Game and Rohinton Mistry's *Tales from Firozsha Baag*

Sports, to my mind, are destined very appreciably to solve that really intricate problem—the social relations existing all over the world between the White and Black man.

— J.M. Framjee Patel, *Stray Thoughts on Indian Cricket*

Patel is wrong—at least according to Rohinton Mistry's *Tales from Firozsha Baag*. Sport (in this case, cricket) does not solve problems of race or masculinity; it creates them. On rare occasions in Mistry's collection of short stories, cricket brings the momentary joy that comes with physical accomplishment and camaraderie or brief relief from the pressures of daily life in the Baag. But for the most part, cricket remains a doomed enterprise in *Firozsha Baag*, and shows none of the potential that Patel (and other historians of the sport) imagines. It is, instead, an activity full of failure and frustration. Mistry's characters discover that the sport is nothing less than a forum for the maintenance of singular and impossible ideals about race and masculinity. The cricket bat is as much a weapon designed to enforce racial boundaries as it is a figurative phallus and a sign of hegemonic masculinity; and the difficulties that Mistry's characters have with cricket remind us of his early fiction's desire to acknowledge and disturb imperial fantasies and offer flexible and pluralized renditions of race and gender.

*Firozsha Baag* offers a very particular version of cricket, one that amplifies the sport's imperial roots and ignores more common, contemporary, and flexible renditions of the sport that recognize its potential for postcolonial negotiation and national expression or its newfound commercial or global character. Since the early 1960s (inspired by C.L.R. James' seminal *Beyond a Boundary*), sports historians and sociologists have read the game as a forum for the imposition, resolution, and resistance of racial and masculine ideals. In countries in South Asia and the West Indies, cricket began as a sport with civilizing function, but was quickly repurposed as a complicated national expression, rife with the tensions of assimilation and indigenization,

colonial performance and postcolonial challenge. More recently, cricket is understood in terms of its ties to global corporations, which make it a slick and stylized commodity that overwrites local or national investments in the game and turns the players into salesmen eager to pitch the next product from Adidas or workers ready to score the biggest contract. But the cricket in Mistry's *Firozsha Baag* is markedly different from either of these interpretations: the collection focuses on the sport as an invention of the British empire and its fantasies and anxieties about race and gender.

The singularity of Mistry's version of cricket is remarkable. Any sport—including cricket—carries with it a host of cultural meanings that are almost endlessly articulated, challenged, and ignored by its reporters, fans, players, and historians. American football, for instance, is as much an allegory for Taylorized scientific management as players perform repetitive and specific tasks and labour under the constraints of an ever-present clock (an interpretation that Walter Camp offered in the 1880s and Michael Oriard repeated in the 1990s) as it is a metaphor for war with its emphasis on training, discipline, strategies, and violence (something we can see in Don DeLillo's *End Zone*), or one of our "intricate rituals" that allows for a public display of masculine physical intimacy otherwise unperformed or unrecognized (as Barabar Kruger might see it). So, too, with baseball; it is just as often thought of as staged nostalgia for a pastoral national life (so frequently, in fact, that David McGimpsey calls this idea "old news" [1]) as it is thought of as an expression of American individualism and personal responsibility, where every achievement can be recorded and compared and every error is duly noted (as Michael Mandelbaum reminds). Sport is a text, ready to be assembled and analyzed, its meanings discovered, debated, and denied—and cricket is no different. As we can tell from the appearances of cricket in his later fiction, Mistry understands the range of available meanings that the sport offers; but in *Firozsha Baag* he has selected carefully and offers a very specific interpretation of the sport.

The cricket in *Firozsha Baag* shows remarkable political and polemic character—attributes that contradict Mistry's recent and widespread reputation. Ever since *A Fine Balance*, Mistry's writing has been reviewed and praised for its realism. When heavyweight reviewers in heavyweight publications celebrate his novels as latter-day, India-centric incarnations of work by Balzac (Pico Iyer in *Time*), Tolstoy (John Updike in *The New Yorker*), and Dickens (Jamie James in *Atlantic Monthly*), they suggest that Mistry's writings are valuable only because they read as sweeping, moving, and—above

all else—plausible documents of Indian life. They “evok[e] every distinctive smell and sound of Bombay’s streets” or bring to life “a full social picture” with the “old-fashioned mimetic virtues” of “[l]iveliness, precision, weight.” A full (and necessary) discussion of the consequences that this reputation has for Mistry’s work lurks beyond the scope of this essay;<sup>1</sup> but it is enough to say that a realist-oriented reading of Mistry’s stories and novels limits recognition and understanding of its explicitly political and postcolonial claims about assimilation and appropriation, its emphasis on storytelling and the limits of representation, and its fascination with gender’s demanding and flexible identities. More to the point, such a reputation might keep us from understanding Mistry’s frequent descriptions of cricket in *Firozsha Baag* as something more than believable accounts of a popular pastime.

So far, the attention paid to *Firozsha Baag* has zeroed in on its scatological imagery or emphasis on storytelling—and for good reason. It’s impossible to get through one of *Firozsha Baag*’s stories without stumbling upon a spit stain, slipping on a puddle of urine, picking up an ominous rumbling in a stomach, or coming across a character’s filthy thoughts. And it’s equally impossible to avoid the telling of or thinking about stories—from Jaakaylee’s private memories to Nariman’s play yard allegories to Kersi’s parents’ thoughts about the contents of his letters. Cricket might not be as prevalent as images of garbage, scat, and general excess, or curious declarations about the necessity and difficulty of telling or listening to stories, but the sport turns up with surprising frequency. Cricket is a crucial part of life in the Baag. It is the game that the boys play outside Rustomji’s door in “Auspicious Occasion.” A cricket bat is Kersi’s weapon of choice when he goes chasing after Frances in Tar Gully in “One Sunday,” and cricket figures prominently in his nostalgia for his carefree childhood in “Of White Hairs and Cricket.” Finally, cricket is the topic of Nariman’s oft-overlooked first tale to boys in “Squatter,” the one that precedes his tale about Sid-Sarosh’s presence in the stalls of Canada. What follows is an account of the meaning of cricket in Mistry’s collection. By looking at Mistry’s renditions of the sport and noticing the longstanding ideas that they give voice to, we can better see the collection’s careful negotiation of the perils of essentialized and singular racial and gendered identities.

### **An Indian Game Discovered by the English**

Read almost any scholarly history of cricket in India written in the past thirty years or so, and you are bound to encounter a postcolonial narrative, one that establishes the sport’s imperial origins—as a game brought over

from England—and ends with an account of India’s passion for cricket, its enthusiasm for its own leagues, teams, and players. In Ramchandra Guha’s *Corner of a Foreign Field*, Boria Majumdar’s *Twenty-Two Yards to Freedom*, Mihir Bose’s *A History of Indian Cricket*, for instance, the story of cricket is a story of postcolonial triumph and national entry into a globalized marketplace. The colonized nation wrests control and expertise from the ruling country to become a dominant player on the world stage. Guha points out that the sport that was the invention of the world’s “games-master” has become “successfully indigenized” and a key factor in producing, soothing, and repeating India’s globalized tensions (xi, 432); Majumdar writes in his prologue that cricket has gone from an imported game to “India’s only crack at world domination” (2); Bose begins his history with an account of India’s 1971 victory over England, after which the team was “hailed . . . as world champions” and England was forced to acknowledge a “new India” (14). Each tells a now familiar story: that India has beaten England at their own game and, because of its triumph, has assumed new global significance. By adapting the British game, practising their bowls, swings, and catches, and by making and celebrating its own superstars and villains, Indians have rejected old expectations about who they were and what they could do. They took away a tool of the empire, these histories tell us, and made it their own. Or as Ashis Nandy puts it in *The Tao of Cricket*: “Cricket is an Indian game accidentally discovered by the English” (1).

As popular as this historical narrative is, it is not the version that turns up in *Firozsha Baag*. For sure, Mistry’s stories recognize cricket’s colonial history, but they refuse to acknowledge the sport as an opportunity for resistance. Cricket is neither a forum in which mimicry gives rise to a meaningful ambivalence (as Homi Bhabha might understand the game) or an opportunity for subaltern groups to challenge “the domination imposed on them” (as Michael Messner puts it) (13). Indeed, no mimicry in *Firozsha Baag* disturbs colonial authority, no appropriation overwrites or obscures imperial origins. Instead cricket is solely a product of the British Empire, as fantastic and as foreign as the fantasies imagined on the pages of Kersi’s Enid Blyton books.

That interpretation is, admittedly, a little surprising, especially in light of Ajay Heble’s definitive and perceptive article about the collection’s emphasis on hybridity; and especially in light of the sport’s figurative potential. After all, cricket has travelled (like many of Mistry’s characters, from Nariman Hansotia to Minocher Mirza) widely; its past and present lends itself to renditions of cultural pluralism (it was a game first picked up by the Parsis and

whose roots were thought to be both British and [vaguely] Persian<sup>2</sup>); and one of the goals of the sport is to hit the ball to or past the suggestively named boundary. But Mistry's cricket is only a forum for racial purity or cultural hygiene, a sign of often violent colonial authority, one that blocks out, wipes away, or refuses to acknowledge any meaningful or strengthening difference.

Some of the earliest appearances of cricket in *Firozsha Baag* have to do with Kersi's cricket bat, an obvious figurative phallus—the significance of which I'll return to in the next section. But what also becomes clear in the first two stories about Kersi's development ("One Sunday" and "Of White Hairs and Cricket") is that cricket is a British sport. The boys play it in the compound, but it is treated like some of the other artifacts from British rule that surround Kersi, his friends, and his family: part of a distant and idealized past, one which he longs for at the conclusion of "Of White Hairs and Cricket." Cricket is part of Kersi's life that is no longer meaningful, the product (or creator) of a "silly and childish fantasy" like the Blyton books, reliant on images and values associated with "a small English village, where he would play with dogs, ride horses in the meadows, climb hills, hike through the countryside, or, if the season was right, build a snowman and have a snowball fight" (35).

The acknowledgement of cricket's history as an English sport is almost always in full view in Mistry's descriptions of the game and its equipment. Take, for instance, the long passage that proceeds the admission that Kersi now uses the bat "mainly for killing rats":

The first time that Kersi successfully used his bat against a rat, it had been quite messy. Perhaps it was the thrill of the chase, or the rage against the invader, or just an ignorance about the fragility of that creature of fur and bone. The bat had come down with such vehemence that the rat was badly squashed. A dark red stain had oozed across the floor, almost making him sick. (34-35)

This passage is one of Mistry's reminders that the bat is a metaphoric phallus for a pubescent boy—an instrument that he uses for the first time and ends up making a mess. But there are other figurative possibilities, too. It is also metaphor for imperialism. It makes a mess of things, is often ignorant of the beings that surround it, and is inexplicably violent towards the "dark" animal-like inhabitants that appear to threaten their way of life. Bat in hand, Kersi easily and readily defends his empire against unwanted invaders.

This connection between cricket and the British empire is readily apparent in Mistry's descriptions and in some of the earliest writings about the sport in India at the turn of the twentieth century. What they make clear

again and again is that cricket was eventually seen as a way to impose British values, to train the Indians (especially the Parsis, who took up cricket first) to be like any other Englishman on the pitch. Commentary, for example, on a Parsi cricket team's tour of England reads: cricket "can tend to promote an assimilation of tastes and habits between the English and native subjects of our Empress-Queen [and] cannot fail to conduce the solidity of the British Empire" (qtd. in Williams 28). For its part, J.M. Framjee Patel's *Stray Thoughts on Indian Cricket*, first published in 1905, is particularly insistent about cricket's colonizing function. The game has "educational value" (60), makes "the task of governing an alien people . . . easy and profitable" (71), and has proved to be a "great social reformer," "refining" the Indians' "dress, manners, and much else besides" (60). The cricket field is where the Englishman "drops all social distinctions for a time, and begins to like any man" and where it is possible to imagine some sort of newly "invented chemical preparation, or some such thing, which would convert a black face into a fair one" (68).

One of the more compelling features of these and other accounts of cricket's civilizing function is their use of the language of hygiene. David Spurr in *The Rhetoric of Empire* points out that colonial discourse is heavily invested in tropes of debasement, as a way of expressing its difference from and longing for colonized bodies. They are something that can be worked on, polished, cleaned up. The empire is healthy, strong, and able. That imperial discourse appears with particular force in Patel's *Stray Thoughts*. In Patel's account, cricket is responsible for the refinement of the Indians (as if they were coarse or unpolished or impure). It is a "healthy" game with "healthy" contact with the "race of rulers" (62) and a chance "to strengthen" the Parsis' physical and moral qualities (70). It is the closest thing to some magical sanitizer or racial purifier (the chemical that Patel hopes for) to wipe away the dirtiness of his race.

In part, these historical descriptions of cricket help explain the game's function in *Firozsha Baag*, Kersi's distaste for it, and its intimate relation with tropes of debasement, images of scat, garbage, and general excess.<sup>3</sup> When Savukshaw waves his bat "as if to say, come on, you blighters, play some polished cricket" (154), or when Kersi's Sunday mornings are defined by the two activities of helping out with his father's Sunday morning hygiene routine and playing cricket, and when Kersi carefully repairs his cricket bat and gets rid of the excess cord that "had come unwound and had gathered in a black cluster at its base" (33), they are invoking longstanding ideas about cricket:

that it was a game that swept away difference, sanitized unsightly messes, and strengthened the empire into a solid and healthy body. That alone helps explain Kersi's reactions to the game and Mistry's rejection of it. When Kersi returns from Tar Gully, he "retched without success . . . ripped off the rubber grips and slowly, meditatively, started to tear the freshly glued cord from around the handle . . . , then smashed his foot down upon [the bat]. There was a loud crack as the handle snapped" (45). Kersi's dismantling of the clean and bound cricket bat is a metaphor for his dismantling or his disruption (literally its unwinding and his cracking) of the imperial fantasy that it represents. When he cracks (showing its crack or just putting one in it?) that bat, he is rejecting the apparent solidity and purity of the empire because it is unsatisfying, disappointing, or—for Kersi—wretched.<sup>4</sup>

This fracturing of imperial fantasy brings me to "Squatter." "Squatter" is the most popular story in the collection, if we measure by the number of times it has been written about or anthologized. The story itself has three main parts: one, the tale of Savukshaw, the "greatest cricketer of . . . all" (152); two, the tale of Sid-Sarosh and his trials and failures in Canada and his eventual return to India; and, three, the telling of these two tales. Mostly, the latter two parts receive attention—and the former is left alone, despite the fact that cricket is a crucial portion of the story. It is the subject of the first tale that Nariman tells the boys; and Nariman himself shares a name and a (make-believe) scar with one of India's most famous cricketers, Nariman Jamshedji Contractor.<sup>5</sup> When John Eustace, in his otherwise helpful "Deregulating the Evacuated Body," reads the story, however, he arrives at a curious conclusion. It is, in his words, a story that "not only affirms national identity, but hinges its success on Parsi intervention. Through his example, Savukshaw signifies how the marginalized Parsis could ensure India's success were they to resume their central place on the national scheme/team" (32). For Eustace, then, it is the successful version of Sid-Sarosh's story, where he happily and successfully finds a home away from home.

That reading is a tempting one, but it has its limits, mostly because it does not account for cricket's imperial roots and does not recognize just how little Savukshaw actually accomplishes. Savukshaw's tale is not only about success (where he successfully beats the English at their own game) but also recounts ample frustration and mitigated failure. In other words, the tale is a lesson about the limits of successful racial and/or cultural integration and the attendant dissatisfaction. There is good reason to think that Savukshaw's story is a story of successful integration, one that sees him seamlessly adapt

to a game on the ruling country's home turf. In the allegorical battle between England and India, Savukshaw, to some extent, plays the role of the hero, taunting the opposition, bringing the team back from certain defeat, and (nearly) slaying the English giant with the "bullet-like shot" that he "purposely aimed . . . right at him" (155). Moreover, the description of the effect of Savukshaw's bloody shot suggests that his play effectively disturbs or overthrows the empire. The ball "startl[es] the chap inside preparing tea and scones who spilled boiling water all over himself and was severely hurt" and its stitches "had ripped, and some of the insides had spilled out" (156-57). So, it seems that Savukshaw has beaten the empire at its own game, and won this epic battle. In fact, we even have a repetition of the language of disruption and dismantlement that appears at the end of "One Sunday"; things are startled, spilled, and ripped out.

There is a crucial difference, however, between Kersi's disruption of the imperial fantasy and the disruption that Savukshaw initiates. Kersi's disruption puts an end to the game, signals his refusal to participate. Savukshaw's disruption happens within the context of the game, one that he keeps playing and keeps trying to win. But here is the catch, and here is where we can start to realize Savukshaw's limits and his frustration. It's a game he does not win, and it's a game he does not play for very long. Nariman highlights the only lasting consequences of Savukshaw's performance. The game ends in a tie and the "annual ball budget was thrown badly out of balance" (156). That's it. He is not one of Bhabha's (or Naipaul's, for that matter) mimic men that disturb imperial authority as they mimic or mock its actions. Nor is he one of James' cricketers, repurposing a Victorian game for the staging of racial and class tensions. Try as Savukshaw might, he does not overthrow the empire or disturb its dominance. He only overthrows their ball budget. So, to borrow a phrase from Eustace, if Sid-Sarosh "cannot see beyond the dominant conventions . . . to read the signs of success" (37), then Savukshaw cannot see beyond the conventions of cricket to read the signs of failure. Savukshaw adapts seamlessly to his new environment. His language and his play suggest that he is just like the Englishmen on the cricket pitch—something also alluded to by the final score. They are equals; he has been assimilated.

Assimilation is, for Savukshaw, ultimately unsatisfying and risky, a conclusion indicated by the dénouement of Nariman's tale about cricket. Savukshaw's post-cricket life is marked by two details: one, his departure from cricket for more mobile activities (as a champion bicyclist where he becomes "the fastest man on two wheels," and as a pole vaulter where he becomes



“a bird in flight” [157]); and two, his adventures as a hunter, in which he confronts a tiger just before the tale ends abruptly. The first account suggests Savukshaw’s own dissatisfaction with cricket because it does not hold his attention for long and indicates his desire for (social) mobility—something which cricket fails to offer him. As Nariman confirms, the correct interpretation of the tale is that Savukshaw “was a man searching for happiness, by trying all different kinds of things”; even though he was (mildly) successful, “it did not bring him happiness” (160). The second detail is more complex. Nariman ends his tale of Savukshaw this way: “[A]s soon as he lifted the first morsel to his lips, a tiger’s eyes flashed in the bushes! Not twelve feet from him! He emerged licking his chops! What do you think happened then, boys?” (158). Nariman never tells them what happens to Savukshaw. He only invites them to speculate about the conclusion. But what remains clear (to us, if not the boys) is that the terms of Savukshaw’s confrontation have changed. He is no longer in a figurative and literal contest with England; he is, instead, in a contest of sorts with India. The tiger is India’s national symbol, and Savukshaw’s surprise meeting with the tiger suggests that the source of his difficulty is no longer the imperial ruler, but the colonized country, the home country that he seems to have left behind. He ends, then, in a similar position as Sid-Sarosh, caught between two worlds, never finding a place of comfort, always at risk or in danger. After all, even if Savukshaw isn’t scared, it is a situation that is “[t]errifying for us, of course” (157).

### **A Man’s Game**

So far, I have examined cricket as a forum for the production and maintenance of imperial fantasies about race and culture. In ways that recall some of the earliest writings about the cultural value of the sport, Mistry’s stories in *Firozsha Baag* imagine cricket as a game that sustains visions of racial and cultural hygiene, one that wipes away meaningful differences—as if everyone were English and every open field in Bombay or near the Baag was flat meadow in rural England. Kersi’s and Savukshaw’s eventual rejection of cricket, then, signals their general dissatisfaction with the game’s colonizing function. As we know from his repeated recognition of his humility in the face of “the ambiguities and dichotomies confronting me” (201), Kersi discovers a life more messy, more diverse, more ambivalent, and more satisfying than what cricket allows.

Cricket is very much a fantasy of the British empire but it is also an arena for the construction and maintenance of, to use a term defined by R.W.

Connell, “hegemonic masculinity,” a “configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees . . . the dominant position of men and the subordination of women” (77). We find in Mistry’s *Firozsha Baag* that cricket is a game for men who are robust and energetic, who are impervious to pain, who govern the actions of themselves and others. We also find, however, that some of the central characters—especially Jehangir, Kersi, and his father—have distinct trouble living up to this idealized version of masculinity. The collection is, in its developing the contrast, a refusal of the ideals of masculinity that cricket offers, and the recognition of alternative ways of being a man.

In its earliest incarnations, the cricket pitch was a site on which to demonstrate a version of idealized and idolized masculinity defined by youthful exuberance, stoicism, and physical strength and agility. A number of the same tracts that imagine cricket as a tool of the empire also imagine cricket as an instance of hegemonic masculinity. On his travels through India, F. St. J. Gore discovers cricket in a remote and rural village, and he is reminded that this game is a manly one. “It is pleasant,” he writes, to notice the care that is given to stimulate such rational amusements for young India. In no country in the world do the boys stand more in need of the open manliness that is fostered by honourable competition in outdoor games” (qtd. in Guha 50). In Patel’s *Stray Thoughts*, cricket is as much a sign of the empire as it is a sign of vigorous masculinity. Cricket is one of the “manly, healthy games” the Parsis play (62), provides them with “excellent physical preparation for military service” (70), and produces men of “real grit” joined together in “the ‘Brotherhood of the Bat’” (75). Elsewhere, the absence of masculinity marks the Indians that refuse to take cricket seriously. At the end of the nineteenth century, one newspaper correspondent makes the following claim about Hindu cricket: “I amused myself a long time ago with watching the progress of a Hindu cricket club. The members were elegant youths of the Prabhu caste and promised very well at first, but their kilted garments rather interfered with running, and they threw the ball when fielding in the same fashion as boarding school girls. . . . I fear the club is extinct” (qtd. in Majumdar 79).

The overlap of race, gender, and sport that appears in these renditions is well-known. Sport has been imagined elsewhere as a colonizing force that imposes hegemonic masculinity on dominated subjects or as a forum for the achievement of racial acceptance by way of masculine achievement—two

distinct but related understandings of gender performance and racial identity. What we see in *Firozsha Baag*, however, is neither the imposition nor the negotiation of the features of masculinity; we see the complete rejection of cricket because of its investment in masculine ideals that can never be achieved or maintained.

Cricket's longstanding masculine ideals are recognized and rejected in *Firozsha Baag*—usually by Kersi. His bat reminds us that cricket is a masculine enterprise. He caresses and cares for it in his own room, it is “naked,” its tape looks like “pubic hair” (33), its grip has the potential to look like “uncircumcised foreskin,” putting on the rubber grip is much like putting on a condom (40), and its use results in a sticky end (like the one it gets after killing the rat [35] and the one he “barely rescue[s]” [35] himself from when looking through the girls' underwear drawer). Moreover, this bat helps him obtain—momentarily—some particular characteristics. It helps him protect his home turf and supplies him with the necessary confidence to step into the foreign territory of Tar Gully without betraying his own anxieties. “Of White Hairs and Cricket” reinforces features of the sport's masculine ideals. In a few short passages, we are reminded of the manliness of the game, and its investment in stoicism and youth. In a description that foreshadows the English giant's fate in Savukshaw's tale, Kersi's father brags about his son's manly heroics on the field:

“Today my son did a brave thing, as I would have done. A powerful shot was going to the boundary, like a cannonball, and he blocked it with his bare shin.” Those were his exact words. The ball's shiny red fury, and the audible crack—at least, I think it was audible—had sent pain racing through me that nearly made my eyes overflow. Daddy had clapped and said, “Well-fielded, sir, well-fielded.” So I waited to rub the agonized bone until attention was no longer upon me. (114)

The father's overly formal praise—“[w]ell-fielded, sir, well-fielded”—draws attention to the intersection of the empire and masculinity. At the same time that his praise is a sign of English propriety, it is a celebration of his stoic (and heroic) masculinity, one that remains stalwart and reserved in the face of obvious challenge. Also apparent here (and elsewhere in the collection, for that matter) is that Kersi has trouble maintaining this vision of admired and authoritative masculinity. Notably (and recalling the language of excess that runs throughout the collection, perhaps especially the unsuccessful retching when Kersi cracks his cricket bat), Kersi's eyes “nearly . . . overflow.” Even as he manages to contain his emotions, there are already signs that such control is either impossible or unwanted. Its boundaries are being tested.

In fact, almost everything about cricket's masculine code is unachievable or unsustainable. Kersi's own father is unable to maintain his youthful exuberance on the field. When he takes a break and sits "on the grass a little distance away, he seemed much older than when he was batting or bowling leg breaks. He watched us with a faraway expression on his face. Sadly, as if he had just realized something and wished he hadn't" (124). In effect, he realizes that he is old, that he cannot maintain the youthful masculine appearance he wants. His physical distance is a metaphor, then, for his distance from the vital masculine world to which he clings so desperately.

In *Firozsha Baag*, Kersi's and his father's rejection of and distance from cricket in "One Sunday" and "Of White Hairs and Cricket" is a rejection of the sport's masculine ideals. The remaining stories stage the negotiation of more complex, more varied masculinities. There are many different ways to be a man in *Firozsha Baag*, and the characters are asked almost endlessly to recognize, emulate, or reject competing versions of manliness. For instance, in "Exercisers," Jehangir encounters a range of masculine identities: his own solitary bookish identity, the virile camaraderie of the boys at St. Xavier's, the open sexuality of the man on the bench with his girlfriend, and the lewd and crude behaviours of the men who are "flushing out twosomes in their sanctuaries" (224). Jehangir might long for the sort of masculinity performed by the men on the playground—their confidence, their community, their physical prowess—or he might be rightfully put off by the men who interrupt the surreptitious meetings of lovers. But, like so many other characters, he is reminded that masculinity comes in many forms: from Nariman's confidence to Dr. Mody's cultivation to Rustomji's grumpiness to Pesi's brutishness to Kersi's thoughtfulness. As we encounter these different versions of masculinity, as we see their varying degrees of happiness and success, as we notice how impossible or how frustrating youthful stoicism is to achieve or maintain, we are reminded of the limiting and limited quality of cricket's version of manliness and what other possibilities there are to choose from and perform.<sup>6</sup>

Not surprisingly, then, we can see Kersi's journey not only as the discovery of a hybrid cultural identity, one that throbs between two cultural lives (as the final stories put it), India and Toronto, Chaupatty Beach and the Don Mills swimming pool; but also the discovery of a hybridized gendered identity.<sup>7</sup> After all, Kersi repeats his allegiance to Tiresias—who appears in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and Eliot's *The Waste Land* as both man and woman—and the Parsi immigrant arrives at an identity that is framed in overtly gendered

terms and is distinctly not hegemonic masculinity. His little bathtub, where he lies naked and sees one wavering hair trapped between the hole and the plug, is both reminder of the water at Chaupatty Beach with the guttersnipes and “their little buoyant penises” (243) and the pool in Don Mills where the water laps the “curly bits” of hair straying from the woman’s spandex swimsuit (247). His bathtub is a hybrid territory, marked by signs of different cultures and genders; his nakedness is a reminder of the fish, the hair a reminder of the woman. Furthermore, outside of his bathtub, Kersi cultivates a masculine identity that can only be thought of as a mixture of the men from the Baag. As he admits, Kersi is perhaps most like Nariman (the emblem of heterogeneity in the Baag), but he leers at women like Rustomji, tries to maintain his athleticism like his father, and collects and stores things—in this case memories, not stamps—like Dr. Mody. This final story, then, is a reminder that gendered identity is more complex, more accessible, and more satisfactory than the impossible version that is played out on the cricket pitch.

In Mistry’s most recent novel, *Family Matters*, cricket appears again.<sup>8</sup> “[C]ricket itself is not cricket,” says Vilas; “[it’s] just another crooked business, with bookies and bribes and match-fixers who break the cricket-loving hearts of us subcontinentals” (196). Vilas is right—but not only because the sport’s reputation as a bastion of “fair play and integrity” (ideals, he remarks earlier, brought to the game by the British) has suffered because of scandal. Vilas is also right because “cricket itself is not cricket”—not in *Family Matters*, not in *Firozsha Baag*, not in any sports historian’s description of it. Cricket is always more than itself, always more than a few simple rules, a handful of players, and a couple of wickets. “Cricket” designates a wide but well-defined range of cultural meanings, articulated and performed by its players, fans, haters, writers, and historians, and Mistry’s *Tales from Firozsha Baag* chooses carefully from these overheated opinions and thoughtful analyses. His rendition of cricket is unfailingly particular, but it is also a valuable reminder that our cultural practices always have meaning; the game itself is never just a game.

## NOTES

- 1 The consequences are many; here are two. When Mistry’s fiction is understood only for its true-to-life portrayals, it is left open to the sort of “asinine” evaluations by the likes of Germaine Greer, who incredibly and famously expressed her hatred for *A Fine Balance* because it didn’t confirm her own impressions of India. But I also suspect that when North American audiences read his literature only as realism (as evidenced by his appearance on *Oprah*), his novels or stories function as tourist literature that introduces North

American audiences to other people that they have not met and places they have not been to. As noble as that sounds, it has the potential to dovetail with a pseudo-cosmopolitanism that substitutes the reading of a single novel for diligent and careful understanding of a nation and its cultures.

- 2 In his “Stray Thoughts,” Patel notes the Parsis’ hybrid cultural background— “[h]e is a fine product of Persian pluck and English culture—a strong combination, indeed” (61)—and on the possible hybrid background of cricket. It is a game, Patel notes, that was invented by the British, but ancient Persian kingdoms played games “with a bat and ball, nearly allied to cricket” (61).
- 3 The relationship between scat and general excess and cricket appears in the collection’s first story, “Auspicious Occasion.” The flakes of plaster from the ceiling, caused by the neighbour’s dripping toilet, drip into the copper bathtub and they remind Rustomji of the boys who play cricket. The plaster, Rustomji thinks, “floated on the surface, little motes of white. Like the little motes that danced before Rustomji’s eyes when he was very tired, after a long day in the hot, dusty courthouse, or when he was very angry, after shouting at the boys of Firozsha Baag for making a nuisance with their cricket in the playground” (11-12). That relationship appears again in “Squatter”; Nariman’s first story is about cricket, the second about defecation and constipation.
- 4 Much of the collection proves the impossibility or the folly of maintaining a pristine life. Despite his best efforts, Rustomji’s sparkling white *dugli* is spoiled by a splash of tobacco and betel nut juice. In “The Collectors,” the Bombay police’s attempt to keep the streets clean is a Sisyphean task. Note the language of hygiene and excess: “[t]he Bombay police, in a misinterpretation of the nation’s mandate: *garibi hatao*—eradicate poverty, conducted periodic round-ups of pavement dwellers, sweeping into their vans beggars and street-vendors, cripples and alcoholics, the homeless and the hungry, and dumped them somewhere outside the city limits; when the human detritus made its way back into the city, another clean-up was scheduled” (106). Further examples include the returning white hairs on Kersi’s father’s head, Kashmira’s repeated clean-up of her balcony, and the obvious inability of Jamshed’s “very neat missive[s]” to speak with authority about the excess and excitement of Bombay (188).
- 5 The test cricket career of Nariman Contractor, a captain of the national team, was ended when he was hit in the head by an errant pitch when touring Barbados. As Mihir Bose tells it, Contractor had emergency surgery and an iron plate placed in his head. When Mistry’s Nariman is talking about the cricket players, he is sure to point out the place “on his furrowed brow” where “a vicious bumper opened a gash” (153).
- 6 And gender is a performance in this collection—something that we can see in the continual parade of phalluses (which some of the Baag’s inhabitants locate as the source of masculinity), both real and fake: from Kersi’s cricket bat to the re-attached penis in China (78) to the plantain used in Jehangir’s fantasy about the *kayrawalli* (215) to the “very large, very masculine lump” produced in the folds of Gajra’s sari (17). All of these faux phalluses are signs of the performance of gender identity, that masculinity can be staged, faked, removed, and re-attached.
- 7 Homi Bhabha still has the best explanation of the now well-worn term “hybrid,” but for a thorough rendition of its challenges and a convincing defence of its relevance, see Marwan M. Kraidy, *Hybridity, Or the Cultural Logic of Globalization*.
- 8 Cricket also appears in Mistry’s first published story. As a child, Mistry wrote a story called “Autobiography of a Cricket Bat” which won first place in a writing contest sponsored by a sporting goods store in Bombay (Gibson).

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