

Interrogating Multiculturalism Double Diaspora, Nation, and Re-Narration in Rohinton Mistry's Canadian Tales

Rohinton Mistry was born in Bombay in 1952 and migrated to Canada in 1975. As a “writer from elsewhere” (Salman Rushdie’s term for writers whose narratives fall outside the dominant culture [12]), Mistry has used his location in diaspora to interrogate common assumptions about home and belonging in his Canadian narratives.¹ “[T]hrobbing between two lives, the one in Bombay and the one . . . in Toronto” (*Tales* 186),² his migrant characters grapple with the complexities of negotiating new identities out of the “ambiguities and dichotomies” (192) of their situation. Living between two countries can be fraught with tension, but it does offer a potentially productive site from which to challenge homogeneous narratives of the nation and its people.

Mistry’s awareness of the ambivalence and instability of his cultural, geographical, and ideological location is evident in the way his texts, particularly *Tales from Firozsha Baag*, explore the cultural politics of diaspora. Mistry’s self-conscious positioning in diaspora and his affirmation of it as a space that emphasizes multiplicity and ambiguity bears important resonances with Homi Bhabha’s enunciation of a “third space,” that in-between space of hybridity where cultural change can be brought about through the “contamination” of established narratives and dominant points of view.

Mistry’s commitment to the non-essentialist cultural politics of diaspora derives not only from his experience as an Indian immigrant in Canada but also from his Parsi ethnicity. When he was asked to compare his work to that of Bharati Mukherjee (another well-known writer of the Indian diaspora who had at that time settled in Canada), Mistry immediately drew attention

to the disparate cultural spaces occupied by their characters. He pointed out that in contrast to Mukherjee's mainly Hindu characters, "my characters are outside Hindu India. And because of the history of the Zoroastrian religion, it does not provide a solid anchor like Hinduism or Judaism or Islam" (Hancock 149). Mistry has said that he hopes his writing will "preserve a record of how they [the Parsis] lived, to some extent" (qtd. in Barucha 25).³

As a Parsi, Mistry is a member of India's tiny Zoroastrian community that traces its origins to pre-Islamic Persia (now Iran). The Arab conquest of Persia in the seventh century resulted in the forcible conversion to Islam of an overwhelming number of Persian Zoroastrians. Those Zoroastrians who refused conversion had to flee their homeland to escape religious persecution. The majority of them migrated to India, probably in the tenth century, settling in Gujarat in the north western region of the subcontinent.⁴ The Parsis have had to come to terms not only with their minority status (they constitute only .007% of the Indian population) and inability to make claims to specific territory, but also with the fact that their origins and cultural values lie outside the (Hindu) nationalist narrative. This submerging of their narrative by the cultural dominant (especially since Independence) has created a profound sense of loss and alienation for the Parsi community. As a Parsi, then, Mistry was, to use Nilufer Barucha's words, "in Diaspora even in India" (23).

While most minority migrant writers speak of their experiences of alienation in Canada, Mistry, as a Canadian of Parsi ethnicity, has experienced national exclusion not only in Canada but also in his Indian homeland. One of the characters in Mistry's short story collection, for example, draws connections between his experiences of racial victimization as an Indian immigrant in Toronto and the bullying and other forms of discrimination he experienced in school in Bombay because he was a Parsi. My aim in this paper is to demonstrate that it is precisely Mistry's experience of "double displacement," as Barucha terms it (23), or "double diaspora" that foregrounds the instabilities in the national narrative of culture and identity.

The phenomenon of "double diaspora" points to the existence of more than one homeland. In a real sense, however, there is no "original" homeland for the Parsis to return to—the historical Persia no longer exists. For the Parsis, there is only the blurred narrative of another place and time of origin before their migration to India. It is this realization of the deep disjuncture between the historical home and the present reality of homelessness that the Parsi subject in Mistry's fiction takes with him to Canada, his

new homeland outside India. The ethnic Parsi's positioning in yet another diaspora in Canada further emphasizes the instability of national identity, a concept that is premised on the illusion of a single, primordial homeland. The "double diaspora" in Mistry's fiction disturbs the ontological certainty or stability of "home," and thus undermines the nationalist narrative of Canada.⁵ This process can be seen very clearly in Mistry's first published work, the short story collection entitled *Tales from Firozsha Baag* (1987).

Set mostly in a Bombay Parsi tenement, *Tales from Firozsha Baag* is largely concerned with constructing a narrative of culture and identity for India's Parsi community. This concern is manifest in the opening story, "Auspicious Occasion," which, by focusing on the everyday life and cultural practices of "an orthodox Parsi [couple] which observed all important days on the Parsi calendar" (9), asserts the distinctiveness of the minority Parsi community in India. All the major signs of Parsi cultural identity are brought to the reader's attention: the ancient religion of Zoroastrianism, Parsi festivals such as *Behram roje*, and institutions such as the Fire-temple and the Towers of Silence.

Crucially, although the Firozsha Baag residential complex functions as the space that delineates Parsi identity, Mistry subtly blurs its boundaries through two types of movement: journeys that take the Parsi characters away from the enclosed, private space of the Baag and into the overcrowded, public spaces of the city where they interact with other Indians; and the incessant shuttling between India and North America (usually Canada) for reasons of education or migration. Additionally, the Irani restaurant just outside the compound of the Baag, the neighbouring "low class" apartment complex of Tar Gully with its mainly Marathi Hindu residents, the nearby bicycle-repair shop called "Cecil Cycles" (the name of which hints at India's colonized history), and even the solitary Muslim tenant in Firozsha Baag are all incorporated as signs of the complex heterogeneity of Indian life.

Nariman Hansotia is the resident storyteller of Firozsha Baag through whom Mistry relates several of the stories in *Tales*. Like most storytellers, Nariman is a highly regarded elder of his community who "functions as the tribal spokesman and the repository of the community's heritage" (Malak 190). Yet, at the same time that Mistry constructs Nariman as the exemplar of Parsi identity, he also makes several tacit allusions to Nariman's Anglicization or Westernization. For instance, in addition to his English education and obvious love of the English language, seen in the relish with which he introduces new English words into his narration, Nariman, we are told, sports the moustache of a Western movie star (Clark Gable) and often likes

to whistle a tune from *The Bridge on the River Kwai* (Heble 53). Nariman's "hybridity" points to the "selective assimilation" (Kulke 78–79) of the Parsi community, as reflected in its amenability to Anglicization during the period of British colonial rule as well as its receptivity to "Indianization" in the face of contemporary national realities in India. Mistry thus suggests that in spite of the Parsi community's attempts to preserve its distinctness, Parsi identity is by no means fixed or closed in character.⁶

To further destabilize any notion of a fixed Parsi identity, Mistry assiduously inserts the cultural "Other" into his Parsi narratives. Consider, for instance, the inclusion of non-Parsi "Others" such as Gajra, the Marathi maid, in "Auspicious Occasion"; Francis, the Christian odd-job man, in "One Sunday"; and Jaakaylee, the elderly Goan ayah, in "The Ghost of Firozsha Baag." In fact, this background presence of the cultural "Other" is made explicit in "The Ghost of Firozsha Baag," which is narrated entirely from the perspective of Jaakaylee, a "proper Catholic" (whose name is actually a Parsi vulgarization of her "English" name, Jacqueline) (50). The ayah's first-person narration, sprinkled liberally with expressions in Parsi Gujarati as well as in her native Konkani, is framed as a recollection of her personal history. By ranging back through Jaakaylee's memory to her birth in the former Portuguese colony of Goa and to her fifty years of service with the Parsi Karani family of Bombay, Mistry represents Parsi life and culture from the perspective of a non-Parsi. As we listen to Jaakaylee's narration of her life story, we see that, despite the ayah's prejudices about the Parsis, she has been influenced—"[her] name, [her] language, [her] songs" (49)—by them, just as she herself has modified and transformed the cultural life of her Parsi employers. Jaakaylee's hot Goan curries have replaced the Parsi *dhansak* as the Karanis' favourite dish. The Karani household and, by extension, Firozsha Baag become metaphors for the changing configurations of Parsi cultural experience and identity.

Thus, from the first story, "Auspicious Occasion," to the stories in the middle section, such as "Squatter" and "Lend Me Your Light," which bridge India and Canada through the characters' incessant journeying back and forth, and then to the final story in the collection, "Swimming Lessons" (the only one ostensibly set entirely outside the Parsi enclave of the Baag and in fact outside India), we move from a distinct and isolated cultural system with clearly demarcated boundaries, through a mixed cultural landscape, finally to arrive at a temporal and spatial terrain where the borders are so blurred that there can no longer be any stable or homogeneous conception of national space.

Despite the apparently coherent domain of the Parsi housing complex, then, *Tales from Firozsha Baag* does not represent home as a clearly identifiable, homogeneous place. Like the Parsi microcosm of the Baag (which already contains within it other traces, other voices, other memories and histories), home consists of (to use Iain Chambers's description of cultural identity) "shifting configurations of transitive coherence" (39). Rather than seeking to return us to fixed and settled—"rooted"—notions of national or cultural identity, *Tales* constructs home as an unstable site existing in tension and mediation between "roots" and "routes." Mistry's second work of fiction, *Such a Long Journey*, reinforces this fluid idea of home by announcing in its title the difficulty, perhaps even impossibility, of "homecoming." Instead, it is the chronotope of the "journey" itself, the passage between arrivals and departures, which the text suggests carries the meaning of culture.

Mistry's textual reconfiguration of home and identity as dynamic and inherently unstable is also connected to his purpose of challenging the dominant (white) culture's definition of itself in the narrative of the Canadian nation. Mistry has resisted the terms in which the narrative of the non-white migrant writer has been constructed for him in dominant Canadian discourses:

I think they feel that when a person arrives here [Canada] from a different culture, if that person is a writer, he must have some profound observations about the meeting of the two cultures. And he must write about multiculturalism. He has an area of expertise foisted on him which he may not necessarily want, or which may not necessarily interest him. He may not want to be an expert in race relations. ("Author's Headnotes")

What Mistry specifically objects to is the tendency to read multicultural literature through the racial or ethnic labels affixed to its authors. Mistry implies that the multicultural label routinely imposed on the work of non-white authors may be well-intentioned in that it includes writers conventionally excluded from mainstream representation, but it actually serves to reinforce stereotypical images of these authors and their cultural communities. In seeking to emphasize the idea of ethnic or cultural difference, multiculturalism imposes a fixed notion of "difference" itself, obscuring the fact that difference is "weighed differently in given historical moments" (Kamboureli 3).⁷ Current constructions of "multicultural" and "ethnic" in Canada therefore foreclose an understanding, Mistry suggests, of the shifting complexities as well as multiplicity of identities within cultural communities.

For instance, with reference to works by writers of the South Asian diaspora in Canada, the ethnic labels "South Asian Canadian" or "Indo-Canadian" mask the many nuances of difference in the works of writers as diverse in

their thematic concerns, aesthetics, and ideological affiliations as M.G. Vassanji, Neil Bissoondath, Cyril Dabydeen, Sam Selvon, Nazneen Sadiq, Himani Bannerji, Arnold Itwaru, Yasmin Ladha, Shani Mootoo, and Shyam Selvadurai. The personal histories of these authors in Canada, their positioning of themselves and their works within their own cultural groups and within Canadian society at large, and their treatment of cultural identity and difference in their writings are factors that often transcend the “Indian” or “South Asian” classification imposed on them and their work. Furthermore, “Indian” or “South Asian” does not account for multiple geographical and cultural displacements experienced by several of these writers.⁸

Thus, in suggesting that “ethnic” is a label foisted on minority communities to perpetuate their exclusion, Mistry provokes a re-examination of the term as it is used in current constructions of the national. For instance, the narrator of “Lend Me Your Light” comes to fully realize what it is to be called an ethnic in Canada only after he juxtaposes his experience of discrimination as a non-white immigrant in Toronto with memories of his own community’s attitude towards non-Parsi Indians, whom it referred to as “ghati”:

With much shame I remember this word *ghati*. A suppurating sore of a word, oozing the stench of bigotry. It consigned a whole race to the mute roles of coolies and menials, forever unredeemable. (182)

More significantly, Mistry’s objection to Canadian multiculturalism is that, as a liberal framework that accords recognition to non-mainstream writers, it functions to further consolidate their minority position. As Smaro Kamboureli notes, “making such writers visible only by viewing them as representative of their cultural groups does virtually nothing to dispel the ‘marginality’ attributed to those authors” (3). In Kamboureli’s view, the Canadian policy of multiculturalism accords the mainstream culture the power to determine difference and normalcy. Sarosh, the protagonist of “Squatter,” is a Canadian citizen, but he is tormented by “the presence of xenophobia and hostility” (163) solely because he persists in “a grotesquely aberrant” (171), non-mainstream practice. The wise and respected storyteller of the Baag, Nariman Hansotia, drawing from Sarosh’s “sad but instructive chronicle” (160), tells his audience that Canadian multiculturalism is merely a political ruse for discrimination and exclusion:

The Multicultural Department is a Canadian invention. It is supposed to ensure that ethnic cultures are able to flourish, so that Canadian society will consist of a mosaic of cultures—that’s their favourite word, mosaic—instead of one uniform mix, like the American melting pot. If you ask me, mosaic and melting pot are both nonsense, and ethnic is a polite way of saying bloody foreigner. (168)

Defining itself as the “norm,” the dominant white culture measures “ethnic” cultures as deviant, assigning them to the margins. The “ethnic” subject is made to feel that he or she does not fully belong in Canada. Discriminatory social practices and racist assumptions thus are perpetuated by the discourse of multiculturalism, which elides the serious underlying issues of political, economic, and cultural empowerment as well as the management and negotiation of the day-to-day realities of difference. As Enoch Padolsky observes, “In Canada . . . multiculturalism . . . is associated with an ‘ethnic’ cultural ‘song and dance’ approach that distracts from issues of racial inequality and power” (24). It is to resist the hegemonic underpinnings of Canadian multiculturalism that Mistry insists that non-white authors should be regarded as Canadian writers, not as representatives of racial or ethnic groups.

The rejection of the ethnic label and the “difference” it represents, however, is an undertaking fraught with problems. Ranu Samantrai, drawing from her own position as a member of an ethnic minority community, elaborates on the particular nature of the double bind faced by Mistry and other Canadian writers from minority communities:

[T]he dilemma of difference on the one hand means that Mistry can and should be read as Canadian, assimilated into the Canadian canon, judged by perhaps inappropriate criteria, his difference dismissed. On the other, it means that he should be read as Asian Canadian, not really Canadian, perhaps an exotic new offshoot of the Canadian canon, but unable to affect fundamentally the definition of that canon. (37)

One way in which writers like Mistry claim their “difference” (from the mainstream or dominant national culture) and yet reject essentialist assumptions of ethnicity is by calling into question multiculturalism itself. While supportive of multiculturalism as an ideological practice that attempts to accommodate the heterogeneity of the nation’s histories and cultural experiences, Mistry is aware of the assimilationist pressures encoded in state constructions of multiculturalism.

“Squatter” powerfully articulates the problems that arise when an assimilationist multicultural state fails to include the ethnic subject in the national imaginary. On the eve of his departure for Toronto, Sarosh, a resident of the Baag, makes a promise to his relatives that he will return to Bombay if he does not “become completely Canadian in exactly ten years” (162). In Canada, he diligently pursues his assimilation into the national culture: his change of name from “his proper Parsi name of Sarosh” (160) to Sid functions as an index of his willing absorption into the mainstream culture. But Sarosh discovers that the “completely Canadian” identity that he longs for remains elusive. After

ten years of trying to divest himself of “the old way” (161), Sarosh finds that there is still one cultural practice preventing him from becoming “completely Canadian.” Every time he uses the (Western-style) toilet, Sarosh finds that he still has to “simulat[e] the squat of . . . Indian latrines” (161):

At first, this inability was no more than mildly incommodious. As time went by, however, the frustrated attempts caused him grave anxiety. And when the failure stretched unbroken over ten years, it began to torment and haunt all his waking hours. (161)

Sarosh interprets his inability to use the Western toilet as a sign of his failure to integrate: “If he could not be westernized in all respects, he was nothing but a failure in this land—a failure not just in the washrooms of the nation but everywhere” (171). So intent is Sarosh on overcoming his inability to achieve total assimilation that he engages professional help; the counsellor he sees recommends the use of a device, developed with “financial assistance from the Multicultural Department” (168), which will help him change. However, because of the possible risks posed by the appliance, Sarosh decides not to use it.⁹

Having failed “to achieve complete adaptation to the new country” (161), a dejected Sarosh returns to India, “desperately searching for his old place in the pattern of life he had vacated ten years ago” (176). Sarosh’s attempts to secure his former identity are futile—“[t]he old pattern was never found” (177). This disjuncture between his memory of home as a fixed and stable space that can anchor his identity and the present reality leaves Sarosh in a state of extreme disorientation. India can no longer be the same place he left behind years ago. His ancestral homeland has changed, just as Sarosh himself has. The narrative thus suggests that the return to the “pure time” of the past is no longer possible, as there is no past “which is not re-experienced through the categories of the present” (Hall, “New Ethnicities” 258). Mistry deploys the “unalterable fact” (161) of the Indian immigrant’s “squat” in this story not so much to ridicule immigrant desperation but to question the “national” in Canadian multiculturalism. In order to become “completely Canadian” (162), Sarosh is willing to be totally absorbed by the dominant white culture until he is rendered invisible, culturally, in the national scene. But Sarosh’s inability to use the Western toilet without “perch[ing] on top of the toilet, crouching on his haunches” (161) points to his “unalterable” cultural difference (154). This, however, is precisely the point made by the text—that assimilation can never be completely successful. The cultural and historical “presence” of Sarosh’s “Indianness” (symbolized in his squat)

is akin to what Frantz Fanon has called the “corporeal malediction” of his black skin.¹⁰ The text suggests that “Indianness” cannot be erased completely from the Indian Canadian, however Westernized he becomes; he will carry a trace of his Indianness in his new cultural location. The ethnic Canadian will be, to use Bhabha’s terms, “almost the same but not quite” because he is “not white” (*Location* 89). This “not quiteness” is of crucial significance in formulations of the national and constitutes “the important difference” (259) that the Parsi father in the story “Swimming Lessons” cautions his son against losing in Canada. Through Sarosh’s predicament, Mistry foregrounds not so much the idea of being Indian as the idea of being Canadian *differently* (to use James Clifford’s assertions about the complex processes of adaptation and resistance in various national contexts [312]).

Mistry suggests that “visible” immigrants like Sarosh are so desirous of acceptance that they do not see that their inassimilable difference is in fact a valuable commodity: it is a signifier of the heterogeneity of Canadian national identity. Their inability to consider themselves “completely Canadian” reflects the underlying premise of Canadian multiculturalism that considers ethnic subjects mere “squatters” (and here the story’s title inheres with meaning), not rightful or legitimate inhabitants of the national space of Canada.

In rejecting current constructions of Canadian multiculturalism, Mistry proposes an alternative idea of the national that is not based on an opposition between assimilation and exclusion. In so doing, he participates in what Diane McGifford identifies as an urgent task: “to redefine multiculturalism, to de-ghettoize and de-hyphenate it” (x). In questioning the very terms of reference of multiculturalism, Mistry moves away from essentialist notions of identity. If ethnic categories like “Indianness” do not exist outside particular social and cultural contexts, then the national and cultural narrative of “Canadianness” itself is not a category with a fixed content; rather, it is, as Stuart Hall has described the Caribbean context, “subject to the continuous ‘play’ of culture, history and power” (225). “Canadianness” is indeterminate, and its meanings are constantly being renegotiated and rearticulated.

Mistry’s commitment to challenging conventional narratives of nation and culture is also evident in the final story of the collection, “Swimming Lessons.” The unnamed narrator, a young Parsi migrant in Toronto and a former resident of the Baag, tells us about his everyday life in an apartment in Don Mills. His first-person account is interrupted by another voice

telling a story about a middle-aged couple who live in the Firozsha Baag complex in Bombay. This third-person narrative (presented in italics) focuses on the couple as they wait eagerly for letters from their son in Toronto which they hope will tell them something about his new life.

One day, instead of the usual note from their son saying very little about his life in Canada, the parents receive a volume of short stories; they are delighted to find out that their son is a writer. Hoping to discover something about the life that he has built for himself in Canada, the couple eagerly start reading. They are, however, soon disappointed; the book which their son has sent them is not “based on his Canadian experience” but “all about Parsis and Bombay” (256):

Mother and Father read the first five stories, and she was very sad after reading some of them, she said he must be so unhappy there, all his stories are about Bombay, he remembers every little thing about his childhood, he is thinking about it all the time even though he is ten thousand miles away, my poor son, I think he misses his home and us and everything he left behind, because if he likes it over there why would he not write stories about that, there must be so many new ideas that his new life could give him. (258)

Finally, the parents come to the last story in the volume:

The last story they liked best of all because it had the most in it about Canada, and now they felt they knew at least a little bit . . . about his day-to-day life in his apartment; and Father said if he continues to write about such things he will become popular because I am sure they are interested in reading there about life through the eyes of an immigrant, it provides a different viewpoint; the only danger is if he changes and becomes so much like them that he will write like one of them and lose the important difference. (258)

At this point we realize that the collection of stories being read by the couple in the story is actually the same one that we are reading. The couple are reading and at the same time being read about by us. We also discover that the son who has his existence in the narrative of the Indian couple is probably the narrator of the story himself, presumably Kersi, who is probably also the author of the Firozsha tales. Kersi, in this sense, comes close to being the fictional equivalent of Mistry himself. This strategy of narrative self-reflexivity destabilizes reader expectations; it undermines the distinctions between writer/text/reader. By foregrounding the constructedness of these narrative boundaries, Mistry’s narrative calls into question the ontological status of cultural and national boundaries as well. Crucially, the moment that we discover that the first-person narrator of the story is the son in the third-person narrative is also when the Canadian narrative of home con-

verges with the narrative of home in India. Canada and India come together to destabilize any notion of the stability, impermeability, or cultural homogeneity of national identity.

The point made by the text, in the form of Kersi's response to his parents' plea that he write "stor[ies] based on his Canadian experience" (256), is that the Canadian narrative already exists in conjunction with the Indian one. Unlike the parents, who have divided Kersi's life and experiences into an Indian past and a Canadian future, Mistry's text represents Kersi's identity as being in complex mediation between "here" and "there," "present" and "past." The spatial and cultural domains of India and Canada are interconnected, existing in a dialogical relationship with each other. Mistry's text, by providing the ground for such a dialogue through its shifting contexts and multiple intersections, suggests that every national narrative "betrays the constitutive presence of other possible locations or cultures" (Samantrai 34), in the process destabilizing the homogeneous or "closed" character of nationalist discourses.

Water, alluded to in the title of the story, functions as the governing metaphor of "Swimming Lessons," and it points to Mistry's ideas about the fluid contours of national identity. The recurring imagery of water—Bombay's Chaupatty sea, the swimming pool of the local recreation centre, and the bathtub—suggests other ways to think about national and cultural identity.

In India, Kersi's inability to feel "at home" is represented by his inability to swim, mainly because the waters of the Chaupatty are too filthy to enter. In Canada, Kersi's feeling of "failure" at achieving a sense of belonging is reflected in his "terror" of the swimming pool (246). Near the end of the story, Kersi, in the bathtub, attempts to conquer his fear of swimming: he closes his eyes, holds his breath, and dunks his head in his bathtub. He keeps it underwater for a few seconds. Slowly, he learns to open his eyes underwater:

I am slowly able to discern the underwater objects. The drain plug looks different, slightly distorted; . . . I come up . . . examine quickly the overwater world . . . and go in again. I do it several times, over and over. The world outside the water I have seen a lot of, it is now time to see what is inside (259–60).

Kersi's ability to see "overwater" and "underwater" almost simultaneously (because he keeps going into the water and coming up so quickly) reflects his diasporic condition. Thus, the "lesson" the narrative teaches is that one must move away from a national aesthetic conceived in binary terms to a more flexible and dynamic construction of national identity.

Mistry's views about the fluidity of cultural and national configurations

are also evident in his subsequent works. The symbolic resonance of water in “Swimming Lessons” stands in contrast to the image foregrounded in *Such a Long Journey* (1991). The novel’s dominant visual image is the concrete wall erected outside the compound of the Khodadad Building residential complex. Although it is meant for the security and protection of the inhabitants, the “solidity of the long, black wall” (184) (like the blackout sheets that the protagonist Gustad Noble has used to cover the windows of his house since the Sino-Indian War of 1962) acts as a defensive shell, preventing the Parsi residents from interacting with what Gustad considers to be the squalor of Hindu-dominated India—“the flies, the mosquitoes, the horrible stink, with bloody shameless people pissing, squatting alongside the wall” (63).¹¹

Mistry’s representation of the closed Parsi community, walled in by its ethnic separateness, brings to mind Edward Said’s comment about the danger of boundaries. “Borders and barriers which enclose us within the safety of familiar territory,” he cautions, “can also become prisons, and are often defended beyond reason or necessity” (54). Similarly aware that the attachment to one’s cultural or ethnic identity can regress into militant forms of nationalism, Mistry points to the need to destabilize boundaries and to abandon the dangerous notion that cultures are closed and static systems.

Gustad’s view of the separateness of Parsi life is altered when a pavement artist is hired to decorate the Baag’s enclosing wall so as to prevent passersby from urinating against it. The artist decides to paint the wall with images of the gods and prophets of all the world’s religions—“Hindu, Sikh, Judaic, Christian, Muslim, Zoroastrian, Buddhist, Jainist” (182). Although Gustad goes along with the artist’s idea, he would have preferred that a portrait of Zarathustra, the founder of Zoroastrianism, grace the wall—an indication here that Gustad has not yet learned to look beyond his Parsi identity. Soon, the enclosing wall is transformed into a repository of India’s heterogeneous religious identities: in the midst of Zarathustra, Buddha, Guru Nanak, “Nataraja did his cosmic dance, Abraham lifted his axe high above Isaac, Mary cradled the infant Jesus, Laxmi dispensed wealth, Saraswati spread wisdom and learning” (184).

Equally significant is that the wall with the sacred images includes an image of the wall itself: it becomes a “wall featuring a painting of the wall featuring a painting of the wall featuring a . . .” (288). This *mise en abîme* challenges metaphorically the notion of a single point of origin, and it calls attention to the constructedness of cultural systems—a lesson that Gustad has yet to learn.

Towards the end of the novel, with fundamentalist Hindu organizations like the Shiv Sena about to take control of the streets of Bombay, the Municipality decides to demolish the ecumenical wall. In protest, the Khodadad residents organize a *morcha*, which is joined by people of other faiths from neighbouring buildings. The wall, however, is brought down. With the wall down, we are left with the final image of Gustad removing the blackout papers from his window. With light pouring into his war-darkened house for the first time in more than a decade, Gustad begins to see that borders are provisional, merely constructs. This final scene underlines the novel's critique of any cultural system that valorizes retreat from external influences.

Through such devices as the metaphor of the wall in *Such a Long Journey* and the storyteller-within-a-storyteller-within-a-story (Nariman Hansotia/Kersi/Mistry) in "Swimming Lessons," Mistry's narratives attempt to show how cultural meaning is created or assigned. By collapsing boundaries, literal and narrative, Mistry also rejects essentialist notions of home as an absolute point of origin and meaning.

In *Tales from Firozsha Baag*, Mistry raises significant and compelling questions about current constructions of the national in Canada; his subsequent works—*Such a Long Journey*, *A Fine Balance*, and *Family Matters*—similarly challenge the reductive processes at work in the construction of a unitary national narrative for India. Collectively, Mistry's writings, which embrace the political and epistemological complexities of double diaspora, call into question the presumed homogeneities of nationalist narratives. Given the increasing attention paid to issues such as multiculturalism, identity, and difference in Canadian literary and social discourse in recent years, the experiential base and analytic power of Canadian minority writing may well offer, as Padolsky notes, "insights into the ways and means by which 'plural' conceptions can function in the area of race and ethnicity" (22). It is in this sense that Mistry's Canadian narratives exemplify the hope expressed by critic Michael Thorpe that "in Canada South Asian writing will have an increasingly large and responsible role to play" (18).

NOTES

- 1 *Tales from Firozsha Baag* is the only work in Mistry's oeuvre (thus far) that directly thematizes "Canada."
- 2 *Tales from Firozsha Baag*, first published in 1987 by Penguin Canada, was brought out in Britain and the US under the title, *Swimming Lessons and Other Stories from Firozsha Baag*. All page references will be made to the New Canadian Library edition published by McClelland and Stewart, 2000.

- 3 Mistry in interview with Ali Lakhani at the Vancouver International Writers' Festival.
- 4 Today the most thriving Zoroastrian community in the world resides in the cities of Bombay, Surat, and Puna, where its members have sought to live in an environment of religious tolerance where they can practise the monotheistic religion founded by the Persian prophet, Zoroaster (Zarathustra). These Zoroastrians came to be known as Parsis, or Parsees, in India, after Pars (or "Fars"), the heartland of the ancient Persian empire. The Parsis have been prominent members of the commercial and political life of India, acquiring a standing far beyond the relatively small size of their community (roughly 100,000 worldwide, 70,000 of whom live in India). However, as India's population expands steadily, the country's Parsi community faces extinction due to emigration, falling birthrates, the growing tendency to marry outside the community, and a religious ban against accepting converts. For background reading, see Randeria; Hartman.
- 5 Other ethnic groups in Canada could also be considered as members of a "double diaspora": e.g., West Indian Canadians, African Canadians, and Fijian Canadians.
- 6 The language spoken by most Parsis today is Parsi Gujarati, a mixture of the old Farsi and the regional Gujarati. This, together with the adoption of the sari by Parsi women, the celebration of Hindu festivals such as Dasherah and Diwali, and the adoption of important Hindu social structures such as the Panchayat all point to the successful "Indianization" of the Parsis. This does not mean that the Parsis have completely or uncritically assimilated into the dominant culture, for they still retain several distinctive cultural practices. The most conspicuous and controversial of these is their way of disposing of the dead.
- 7 The policy of multiculturalism was officially introduced in Canada in 1971 under the leadership of Pierre Trudeau as an acknowledgement of the cultural and ethnic diversity of Canadians: its aboriginal peoples, the Anglophone and Francophone heritage groups, the influx of other European immigrants since the middle of the nineteenth century, and the more recent arrivals of the "visible minority" immigrants from non-European, mostly Asian, countries.
- 8 Writers such as Bissoondath, Selvon, and Dabydeen, for instance, have come to Canada via the Caribbean; Selvon lived for a few years in England before relocating to Canada. Vassanji, also of the Indian diaspora, migrated to Canada from East Africa. Shani Mootoo, another writer of South Asian origins, was born in Ireland and raised in Trinidad before making her home in Canada.
- 9 Sarosh discovers that many other immigrants have also sought professional help to integrate completely into Canadian society. One man, he learns, looked for help because he could not eat Canadian Wonder Bread without vomiting; he was able to digest only Indian bread made with flour milled in the village back in India. After a series of treatments by the Multicultural Department, however, the man was able to "successfully [eat] his first slice of whole-wheat Wonder Bread with no ill effects. The ultimate goal is pure white Wonder Bread" (166).
- 10 I am using the term "presence" here in the sense meant by Stuart Hall. In rejecting the view that cultural identity can be fixed and secured by looking back to an originary homeland and the notion of pure ethnicity, Hall argues for the existence of at least three main cultural and historical "presences" in the Caribbean—the African, the European, and the "New World"—which constitute the complexity of (Caribbean) identity. See "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" (398).
- 11 The Parsi emphasis on physical cleanliness and avoiding pollution is again evident in the novel *Family Matters*.

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