

"A FOREIGN PRESENCE IN THE STALL"

Towards a Poetics of Cultural Hybridity in Rohinton Mistry's Migration Stories

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1. *Foreign Presences*

The title for this paper finds its origin in a short story called "Squatter" by South-Asian-Canadian writer Rohinton Mistry. This story, from Mistry's collection *Tales from Firozsha Baag*, is, for reasons which I hope will become apparent a little later, a story within a story, and it comes to a focus in the character of Sarosh, an Indian from a Parsi community in Bombay who decides to emigrate to Canada. Before Sarosh leaves his native India, a party is held in his honour and, at this party, his friends and family debate the relative merits and demerits of Sarosh's decision to go abroad. Some of his friends commend Sarosh, suggesting that, by emigrating, he is doing a wonderful thing; "his whole life," they feel, is going to "change for the better" (*Tales* 154). Others, however, are somewhat more circumspect, insisting that Sarosh is making a big mistake: "emigration," they argue is "all wrong, but if he wanted to be unhappy that was his business, they wished him well" (*Tales* 154). As a way of striking a kind of compromise between these two opposed factions, Sarosh, in "a moment of lightheartedness" (*Tales* 154), makes the following promise: "My dear family, my dear friends, if I do not become completely Canadian in exactly ten years from the time I land there, then I will come back" (*Tales* 154-55).

Ten years later, we find Sarosh, now Sid, completely Westernized in every respect save one — he is unable to use Western toilets:

At the point where our story commences, Sarosh had been living in Toronto for ten years. We find him depressed and miserable, perched on top of the toilet, crouching on his haunches, feet planted firmly for balance upon the white plastic oval of the toilet seat. (*Tales* 153)

Later we are told that Sarosh, in the privacy of his own home, is able to squat barefoot. Elsewhere, however,

if he had to go with his shoes on, he would carefully cover the seat with toilet paper before climbing up. He learnt to do this after the first time, when his shoes had left

telltale footprints on the seat. He had had to clean it with a wet paper towel. Luckily, no one had seen him. (*Tales* 156)

Unable to pass a motion Western style by sitting on the toilet seat, Sarosh repeatedly finds himself climbing up onto the seat and simulating the squat of Indian latrines in order to achieve the desired catharsis. Despite the intensely personal nature of Sarosh's problem, the story continually urges us to consider the social and cultural ramifications of his inability:

The world of washrooms is private and at the same time very public. The absence of feet below the stall door, the smell of faeces, the rustle of paper, glimpses caught through the narrow crack between stall door and jamb — all these added up to only one thing: a foreign presence in the stall, not doing things in the conventional way. And if the one outside could receive the fetor of Sarosh's business wafting through the door, poor unhappy Sarosh too could detect something malodorous in the air: the presence of xenophobia and hostility. (*Tales* 156)

Although this might seem to offer a rather unconventional and incommensurable point of departure for a scholarly paper, I begin with this moment because it seems to me to describe a signally pragmatic instance of cultural dislocation. It bespeaks an uneasiness which can only be the result of the problematic relationship between interlocking cultural landscapes, between an ethnic heritage and a new life in the West, or, to put it slightly differently, between what Rosemary Sullivan, in an article entitled "The Multicultural Divide," simply calls *there* and *here*. In Sullivan's words, "this is not a cheap polarity of eelgrass and snow, of a vapid idealized image of a past that is the focus only of nostalgia and a simplified alienating *here*. It is tougher than that. *There* and *here* are interlocked" (26).

That this is not, in Sarosh's case, a cheap polarity is evinced in various ways throughout the story. The "sad but instructive chronicle" (*Tales* 153) of Sarosh's life in Canada is offered by Nariman, the storyteller, as only *one* instance of immigrant experience; in fact, his story of Sarosh significantly begins with the counter-example of Vera and Dolly, two girls who "went abroad for studies many years ago, and never came back. They settled there *happily*" (*Tales* 153, my emphasis). While the offhand, seemingly incidental reference to Vera and Dolly serves as a convenient entrance into Nariman's story of Sarosh, it more suggestively functions as a reminder that different individuals have had varying degrees of success in negotiating their identity vis-à-vis a new system of cultural referents.

It is, however, tempting to see in Sarosh's predicament something that might be symptomatic of the immigrant experience. His inability to use Western toilets becomes, in his mind, a sign of his failure to adapt to a new culture. The discomfort occasioned by his perceived failure is played out through two overlapping areas of alienation: personal unease and social displacement. On a personal level, Sarosh's tale is a kind of narrative of failed conversion: he senses that he has failed because he has not become completely Canadian. On a social level, Sarosh's wash-

room habits seem to give rise to an increased sense of hostility and xenophobia. Upon detecting that things in the stall are not, as it were, being done in the “conventional way,” others, at least as Sarosh sees it, will simply reject him as a foreign and intrusive presence. But what we need to keep in mind, here, is the fact that Sarosh’s story is framed by Nariman, a storyteller with a penchant for unpredictability and ambiguity, for “lots of subtle gradations of tone and texture” (*Tales* 147). Why does Mistry situate the story of Sarosh’s failed immigrant experience within the context of a narrative framed by a storyteller?

2. *Dismantling Fictions of Identity*

The figure of Nariman, the storyteller, is important for our understanding not only of this particular story, but of Mistry’s fiction in general precisely because he, like Sarosh, inhabits the interstices of culture. Despite using the inserted tale of Sarosh as a warning for future generations of Indians who plan to seek happiness and success abroad, Nariman’s own patterns of behaviour implicitly work to undermine the impact of his story. If the example of Sarosh seems to point up the dangers inherent in the process of ethnic interaction and to argue for a *return* to one’s place of origin, Nariman himself contradicts the lesson which he seeks to impart to his listeners. He does this by revealing the extent to which he relies on and is steeped in Western cultural practices. In addition to his fondness for introducing new English words into his stories, for exposing “young minds to as shimmering and varied a vocabulary as possible” (*Tales* 146), Nariman, we are told, owns a Mercedes Benz (a Western symbol of success and affluence), has cultivated the moustache of a Western movie star (Clark Gable), and likes to whistle a march from a Western film (*Bridge on the River Kwai*). Though they may initially appear to have little, if anything, to do with the story of Sarosh, these allusions to Western popular culture are important for the subtle and intriguing ways in which they remind us that post-colonial identity is always already a hybridized formation.

Mistry, then, frames Sarosh’s story within Nariman’s in order more effectively to explore the consequences of migration. Rather than simply proceeding on the basis of an opposition between the new world (as a source of alienation) and the old world (as the only authentic source of values), Mistry interrogates the relationship between diverse cultural groups and dismantles traditional structures of authority which privilege an essential cultural purity. Moreover, Mistry employs the story-within-a-story technique in “Squatter” as a kind of structural analogue for the very process which Sarosh undergoes: the activity of re-forming the self in a new culture. The shift from a familiar frame of reference (hence the story begins with Nariman’s invocation of Vera and Dolly, two girls who, despite having left the compound many years ago, are vividly remembered by the boys who gather around to listen to Nariman’s tales) to a strange and foreign one becomes a structural enactment of Sarosh’s experience of cultural displacement. The effect which

Nariman's story has on his listeners reinforces this point: the fact that they are unable to determine whether this is a comic or a serious tale forces us to recognize the extent to which notions of purity and structures of authoritarian discourse are being undermined:

Some of the boys struggled hard to keep straight faces. They suspected that Nariman was not telling just a funny story, because if he intended them to laugh there was always some unmistakable way to let them know. (*Tales* 154)

The story itself, like Sarosh, like Nariman the storyteller, is hybrid: at the juncture of the strange and the familiar, the serious and the funny, without ever purely being any one of these things.

What, then, are we, as readers, to make of Nariman's story of Sarosh? In seeking to become completely Canadian, Sarosh seems to want to forget his ethnic past, to efface his origins, and to lose his sense of identity by immersing himself in the Western hegemonic culture. His goal is clearly assimilation and his inability to accomplish the desired transformation can only be seen as a sign of failure: "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" (*Tales* 162). Sarosh, thus, in his own peculiar way, seems to corroborate the view advanced by sociologist Robert Park in his 1928 essay, "Human Migration and the Marginal Man." In this famous piece, Park speaks of the "moral dichotomy and conflict [which] is probably characteristic of every immigrant during the period of transition, when old habits are being discarded and new ones are not yet formed. It is inevitably a period of inner turmoil and intense self-consciousness" (893). Moreover, Sarosh, during this transitional decade in his life, would appear to emerge as an instance of what Park calls

a new type of personality, namely a cultural hybrid, a man living and sharing intimately in the cultural life and traditions of two distinct peoples; never quite willing to break . . . with his past and his traditions, and not quite accepted, because of racial prejudice, in the new society in which he [seeks] to find a place. (892)

Unlike Park's "new type of personality," however, Sarosh, as we have seen, certainly seems willing to make a complete break with his past. The problem stems from what he is *unable* to do. Or is this necessarily the case?

What if we were to interpret the story of Sarosh not in terms of alienation, discomfort and failure, but rather in terms of a *resistance* to hegemonic practices? Such an interpretation would rescue Sarosh from the fate to which he seems to have resigned himself. No longer would we have to think of him, to use Park's terms, as exemplifying the "unstable character" of "the marginal man" (881). Instead of stressing his instability, we might focus on the way in which certain modes of behaviour, certain social practices, have been relegated to a position of inferiority by the dominant culture. In their formulation of a theory of "minority

discourse," Abdul JanMohamed and David Lloyd call for the need to see difference and otherness not as symptoms of an inferior position, but as "figurations of values radically opposed to those of the dominant culture" (10). By clinging to old world social practices — though apparently not by choice — Sarosh, it seems to me, may at some unconscious level be attempting to preserve remnants of meaning unique to his domain of experience in India. What I am suggesting, then, is that in the same way that Nariman's tale of Sarosh, with its deliberate blurring of borders of classification, is a hybridized formation, so our interpretation of the central meaning of this tale is similarly problematized. More explicitly, the act of interpretation, here, fractures in half to reveal its own dependence on a kind of hybridity.

3. *Form and Mastery*

The final point I'd like to make about the frame in Mistry's tale might best be understood when situated within the context of the following remark. Analyzing the tension between centre and margin in the fiction of Mistry and Bharati Mukherjee, Ashok Mathur writes, "their art is an interplay of dichotomies never resolved (nor resolvable), always shifting in and out of focus. Everything blurs: predator becomes victim, cause becomes effect, fact becomes fiction, transparency turns opaque" (19). The frame structure, I would argue, is itself part of this complex site of interaction. Nariman, the teller, is both outside the frame, narrating, and inside it as a minor participant in the action. The fact that he *knows* Sarosh, and is, in fact, invited to his welcome-home party, signals Nariman's position inside the frame. What is more revealing, however, is the way in which his own life is almost a mirror-image of Sarosh's. I say "almost" here because, unlike Sarosh, Nariman is not displaced; for that matter, he is not even inconvenienced by his dependence on Western systems of thought. Nevertheless, Nariman's own hybridized identity alerts us to the possibility that the framed moment in Mistry's text might be as much about Nariman as it is about Sarosh. Or, to put it slightly differently, the border which separates the person doing the framing from the person being framed is itself subject to the kind of blurring we see throughout the story. Given his position both inside and outside the frame, Nariman finds himself in a particularly effective discursive situation, able to speak with what Linda Hutcheon calls "the forked tongue of irony. . . . which allows speakers to work *within* a dominant tradition but also to challenge it" (9).

Working from within in order to subvert: this is, of course, precisely what Rohinton Mistry does throughout the stories in *Tales from Firozsha Baag*, and in the argument that follows I want to suggest some of the ways in which this discursive strategy is played out in some of these stories.

In his extraordinary re-reading of the Harlem Renaissance, Houston Baker discusses some of the "sounding strategies" which enabled American blacks to establish their own (also hybridized) Afro-American identity. He speaks of two

strategies which, when taken together, constitute the essence of black discursive modernism: "mastery of form," and "the deformation of mastery." Baker's formulation is instructive in our current context because it alerts us to the fact that a self-conscious adoption of the discourse employed by a hegemonic white culture (what he calls "mastery of form") represents an important stage in the process of subversion ("the deformation of mastery"). Baker's "sounding strategies" from black literary and cultural history find a kind of approximation in post-colonial notions of abrogation and appropriation. Here are the authors of *The Empire Writes Back*:

The crucial function of language as a medium of power demands that post-colonial writing define itself by seizing the language of the centre and re-placing it in a discourse fully adapted to the colonized place. There are two distinct processes by which it does this. The first, the abrogation or denial of the privilege of "English" involves a rejection of the metropolitan power over the means of communication. The second, the appropriation and reconstitution of the language of the centre, the process of capturing and remoulding the language to new usages, marks a separation from the site of colonial privilege. (Ashcroft 38)

In Mistry's fiction, as we might expect, these strategies of language-use overlap and interlock in a way which makes it difficult to distinguish agency from response, cause from effect.

Mistry's mastery of form, his "ability to give the trick to white expectations" (Baker 49), expresses itself in the ironic continuation of certain stereotypes and clichés. Rustomji, in "Auspicious Occasion," bemoans the departure of the British in India because "Johnnie Walker Scotch, freely available under the British, could now be obtained only on the black market" (*Tales* 15). Similarly, Kersi's parents, in "Lend Me Your Light," seem to take the inferiority of their nation as a given: "We've seen advertisements in newspapers from England, where Canadian Immigration is encouraging people to come to Canada. Of course, they won't advertise in a country like India — who would want these bloody *ghatis* to come charging into their fine land?" (*Tales* 178). By having these Indian characters — and the fact that they are Indian is, of course, crucial — articulate their own sense of inferiority in terms of (a) how much better off they were under British rule, and (b) their very willingness to hold the conviction that Canadian Immigration would not want to advertise *in a country like India*, Mistry appropriates the clichés of colonialist discourse, while simultaneously rejecting their validity. Mastery of form functions here, by way of irony, as a kind of deformation of mastery.

4. *Identity and/as Hyphenation*

The tension between these two (hybridized) strategies of language-use (mastery of form and deformation of mastery) is roughly played out in the central dramatic conflict in "Lend Me Your Light." Like "Squatter," this story also deals with

problems of immigrant experience, but the tone here is unmistakably tragic. Enlarging on the opposition between two childhood friends, Jamshed, who, scornful of his native India, leaves for the Promised Land of America, and Percy, who adamantly stays in India to help villagers in their fight against exploitation, the story finds its focus in Kersi, the narrator, who comes to represent the struggle between the two extreme positions.

Even in his school days in Bombay, Jamshed sets himself apart from others. Instead of having lunch with his classmates in the "school's drillhall-cum-lunch-room," he eats in the family car: "His food arrived precisely at one o'clock in the chauffeur-driven, air-conditioned family car, and was eaten in the leather-upholstered luxury of the back seat, amidst his collection of hyphenated lavishness" (*Tales* 174). There is, it seems to me, something ironic about Mistry's use of the term "hyphenated" in this context. Jamshed dines amidst the hyphenated splendour of a "chauffeur-driven," "air-conditioned," "leather-upholstered" family car, but, once he takes up residence in America, he is unable to recognize his own hyphenated identity. As one critic puts it, ". . . so lost is Jamshed in a world of his own creation, so convinced is he that he has successfully attained the center, that he cannot even recognize his own roots of marginality" (Mathur 25). Moreover, when he returns to Bombay for a visit, Jamshed perpetuates stereotypes about the inferiority of Indians, insisting that Indians should do what they can to become more like Americans: "Indians [are] too meek and docile, and should learn to stand up for their rights the way people do in the States" (*Tales* 185). This is, of course, more than a mere comparison; Jamshed speaks here as a proponent of assimilationist theory. As an immigrant in the United States, he has willingly renounced his ethnic heritage and taken on the values of Americans. As far as he is concerned, he has become *one of them*.

Percy, by contrast, refuses Jamshed's invitation to take up a new life in the United States, and continues to fight for change and justice in a small Maharashtra village. His brother, Kersi, the narrator of the story, is, however, not nearly as certain of his own position. He too, like Jamshed, has emigrated, though he has chosen Canada, rather than the U.S.A. But unlike Jamshed, Kersi has made efforts to retain something of his ethnic past: "I became a member of the Zoroastrian Society of Ontario. Hoping to meet people from Bombay, I also went to the Parsi New Year celebrations and dinner" (*Tales* 182). That Kersi inhabits the ambivalent space between cultures becomes strikingly evident when he comments on a letter he has just received from his brother Percy: "There you were, my brother, waging battles against corruption and evil, while I was watching sitcoms on my rented Granada TV. Or attending dinner parties at Parsi homes to listen to chit-chat about airlines and trinkets" (*Tales* 184). Kersi, in this passage, recognizes the extent to which his Indian heritage has been effaced by the North American cultural mainstream. He also understands that his attempts to retain some

vestige of his ancestral culture have resulted in little more than idle chit-chat. Unlike Nariman, who, in "Squatter," moves with considerable ease between two cultures, or at least between two domains of language-use, Kersi sees his hybridized identity as the site of a struggle between opposing sets of cultural values.

Earlier in the story, Kersi receives a letter from Jamshed. On the subject of his visit to India, Jamshed had written, "Bombay is horrible. Seems dirtier than ever, and the whole trip just made me sick" (*Tales* 181). Kersi is "irritated" by the fact that Jamshed "could express so much disdain and discontentment even when he was no longer living under those conditions" (*Tales* 181). He thus fashions his own letter to Jamshed, trying desperately to assert his ethnic origins:

I described the segment of Toronto's Gerrard Street known as Little India. I promised that when he visited, we would go to all the little restaurants there and gorge ourselves with *bhelpuri*, *panipuri*, *batata-wada*, *kulfi*, as authentic as any in Bombay; then we could browse through the shops selling imported spices and Hindi records, and maybe even see a Hindi movie at the Naaz Cinema. I often went to Little India, I wrote; he would be certain to have a great time. (*Tales* 181-82)

Upon writing this, however, Kersi immediately submits himself to a process of self-correction. "The truth is," he tells us, "I have been [to Little India] just once. And on that occasion I fled the place in a very short time, feeling extremely ill at ease and ashamed, wondering why all this did not make me feel homesick or at least a little nostalgic" (*Tales* 182). Kersi's confession alerts us to the fact that the "authentic" Indian essence he seeks to recover here is nothing but a constructed memory. Or, to put it slightly differently, this self-corrective gesture constitutes, for Kersi, a pronounced recognition of his own hybridity: despite being drawn to his brother's strong sense of purpose, Kersi also bears within himself much of Jamshed (Mathur 25). Hence when Kersi too returns to India, he is ashamed to admit that his views are very much in accord with those of Jamshed: "Bombay seemed dirtier than ever. I remembered what Jamshed had written in his letter, and how it had annoyed me, but now I couldn't help thinking he was right" (*Tales* 187). I do not mean to suggest, here, that Kersi simply comes down on the side of Jamshed, but rather to indicate that the force of Mistry's accomplishment in "Lend Me Your Light," as indeed in many of the other tales in the volume, resides in his evocation of the plight of the cultural hybrid: the impossibility of defining immigrant identity exclusively in terms of one's ancestral past or in terms of one's ability to assimilate into the new culture. Identity, as Kersi discovers, is more a matter of process than a fixed condition.

5. *A Poetics of Hybridity*

At this point, I would like to return to the strategies of language-use I spoke of a moment ago. The problematic interplay between the two positions I have been discussing, between what we might loosely call essentialism and assimilation, rever-

berates in the very language of these stories. While Jamshed, to adapt Baker's formulation, seems to have mastered the form of a Western hegemonic discourse (with all its attendant clichés concerning those on the margins), there are two additional remarks which should be made here. The first concerns our need to distinguish between Jamshed's sense of mastery and Mistry's appropriation of English. If, as I have been suggesting, Mistry works from within in order to subvert, if, by implication, he appropriates English as a vehicle for exploring levels of otherness within himself, Jamshed, by contrast, adopts the behaviour and values of Western culture only in order to immerse himself in that culture. Secondly, the limitations of Jamshed's assimilationist endeavours are revealed in his recourse to modes of expression which belong to the past he thinks he has discarded. Thus Jamshed, in spite of himself, alerts us to the fact that he cannot simply deny his ethnic heritage. Here is what he writes to Kersi about his visit to Bombay: "Nothing ever improves, just too much corruption. It's all part of the *ghati* mentality" (*Tales* 181). Continuing in this vein, he goes on to imply that in America things are much better. The point here is that he fails to recognize the implications of his own use of language. For all his eagerness to immerse himself in Western culture, Jamshed reveals his reliance on a set of linguistic assumptions which are specifically Indian. Deriving its contemporary usage from the context of India's hardy mountain dwellers, the term "*ghati*," as it is used both by Jamshed and by Kersi's parents, becomes a derogatory label for Maharashtra's common labourers. The "*ghati* mentality" to which Jamshed alludes thus has a certain kind of cultural resonance: the very phrase serves to remind us that Jamshed has grown up at a particular time and as a member of a privileged class in India.

Unlike Jamshed, Kersi would seem to be cognizant of the implications of his use of language. Despite his own "fluency in the English language" (*Tales* 178), Kersi openly articulates his hybridity through his use of interlocking discursive strategies. In other words, he too has mastered the form, but his appropriation of English is tempered with a deliberate admixture of words and phrases from his domain of experience in India. Thus in his letter to Jamshed, Kersi attempts to assert and inscribe cultural difference through the very *act* of writing non-English terms: "*bhelpuri, panipuri, batata-wada, kulfi*." Part of the point here, I take it, is the fact that these uniquely Indian culinary delights cannot simply be rendered into English. *Bhelpuri* and *panipuri* have no equivalent terms in English, and the English counterparts for *batata-wada* and *kulfi* (potato pastry and ice cream) are inadequate because they fail to acknowledge what the authors of *The Empire Writes Back* call the "importance of the situating context in according meaning" (Ashcroft 66).

The notion of language as a sign of cultural distinctiveness plays an analogously important role in "Swimming Lessons," the final tale in the collection. The narrator, though unnamed, is presumably Kersi once again, and in this piece we learn

that Kersi, like Mistry, is a writer. Set primarily in Toronto, "Swimming Lessons" also contains shifts to India, where the narrator's parents, in a series of metafictional moments, read and comment on the text which their son has recently written — thus interrupting the text which we, as readers, are in the very process of reading. I'd like to conclude this paper by turning to a passage from "Swimming Lessons" which duplicates the discursive configuration of the migration stories in the collection. After having received a short, unforthcoming letter from their son in Toronto, the narrator's parents fashion their own letter to him. Here is the father telling his wife what to write: "*remind him he is a Zoroastrian: manashni, gavashni, kunashni, better write the translation also: good thoughts, good words, good deeds — he must have forgotten what it means*" (*Tales* 236). That the father's prescription, here, needs to be followed by a translation becomes a kind of reminder of Mistry's own involvement with what I am calling a poetics of hybridity. Thus alongside an insistence on Kersi's heritage ("*remind him he is a Zoroastrian*"), there is an acknowledgement of the necessity of translation: an awareness of the extent to which Kersi has been involved in the process of integrating his ethnic differences into the sameness of a Western cultural mainstream.

In the migration stories in *Tales from Firozsha Baag*, thus, Mistry, through a series of interlocking discursive formations, articulates the ambivalent space between the "old" culture of India and the "new" culture of Canada. Caught between *there* and *here*, his characters and narrators, sometimes in spite of themselves, are engaged in the activity of defining their own hybridity. Like them, Mistry himself is someone who — as a South-Asian-Canadian — negotiates between different cultural traditions, and his fiction powerfully attests to the need for the Canadian literary landscape to open up to include a new kind of critical activity. Indeed, the emergence in Canada of writers like Mistry, Joy Kogawa, Dionne Brand, and Tomson Highway indicates the necessity of moving beyond a nationalist critical methodology — where "the desire to come to terms with oneself in place and time and in relation to others" is, as David Tarras suggests, "a national instinct" (10) — to a cross-cultural exploration of the discourse of hybridity as it is played out both within and beyond our national borders.

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SALT WOMAN

Jane Munro

salt
 rim to a small lake, a mere
 she called it, leftover from a previous life
 salt woman on the verge
 savoring herself

sal sapienta
 sharpened by evaporation
 a little salt makes sugar sweeter
 and lemon tangy
 white crust

salt
 cleans a wound smartly
 rough crystal
 common as the first name you share with thousands
 yet recognize as your own

salt
 brings out the flavour
 does not fester