

Cultural Difference and Multicultural Society: A Critique of Mistry's *Squatter*

- S. Christina Rebecca

Abstract: “Squatter” narrates the tale of sarosh, a parsi in Canada. it is a allegorical tale told by Mistry to describe the woes of an immigrant in a multicultural society. This paper attempts to interrogate the difficulty of cultural retention in multicultural society and the impact of hanging on to it in the present situation. Further, this paper analysis how Mistry through the short stort “Squatter” points out that ethnic and cultural difference should be looked upon as a gift rather than a burden. It should be not be an encumbrances rather liberating

Keywords: migration, metonymic of otherness, postcolonial counter discursive, ex-centric, Assimilation immigrant experience, awareness of difference, cultural difference.

Mistry's *Tales From Firozsha Baag*, is a collection of short stories electrified the literary scene in 1987. *Such A Long Journey* published in 1991 went on to win Governor General's Award for Fiction, Commonwealth Writers Prize, and W.H.Smith Prize and was also short listed for the Booker Prize. *A Fine Balance* (1995) won Governor General's Award, Giller Prize, Royal Society for Literature's Winifred Holtby Prize and Los Angeles Times Award for Fiction. *A Fine Balance* was also shortlisted for the Booker Prize for Fiction, but never made it to the prize. Mistry became very popular when his book *A Fine Balance* was chosen to feature as the book of the month on the Oprah Winfrey Show. His latest book is *Family Matters* (2002) short listed for Booker Prize for Fiction and he won Kriyama Prize jointly with Pascal Khoo Thwe. Mistry draws his inspiration both from sharply recalled childhood experiences and from the upheavals of migrations. The relationship between fiction and autobiography is hard to determine

Firozsha Baag is a fictional Parsi enclave in metropolitan Bombay. The stories differ from one another, but they are interwoven by the common settings that evoke a Parsi world – the customs, traditions, food habits and erotic details of a community that likes to remain confined. Some characters such as Kersi and Rustomji make their appearance in more than one story; for instance Kersi figures in “One Sunday” and “Swimming Lesson,” while Rustomji figures in “Auspicious Occasion,” “Squatter” and “The Paying Guests.” There are other characters like Najamai (seen in “Condolence Visit” and “One Sunday”) and Jehangir (seen in “The Collector” and “Exercisers”) that appear in different roles in different stories. As a result, the readers have the experience of

remaining in the same world where situations change but the mood remains the same.

Roshan Shahani states that, as Parsis, Mistry's characters already inhabit the periphery of the city of Bombay and indeed India itself, while in Canada there is more of dislocation engendered by migration and their visible difference there leaves them on the periphery of the host society.

Bharucha identifies Mistry's writing as an example of that 'diasporic discourse', features of which are particularly acute in the case of Parsis. She suggests that, the distinctly diasporic elements of Parsi writing include a sense of loss, nostalgia and problems in identifying with a new land. Elsewhere, she situates Mistry along with fellow Parsi writers from the 1980s and 1990s, such as Bapsi Sidhwa, Bomban Desai, Farrukh Dhondy and Firdaus Kanga and declares that their work constitutes an assertion of ethnic identity by a community numerically in decline. In the essay "When Old Tracks are Lost: Rohinton Mistry's Fiction as Diasporic Discourse," Bharucha notes that Mistry's writing is informed by the experience of double displacement; that is his position as a member of the Parsi community and his status as a migrant to Canada. The short story is one such where the protagonist undergoes the pulls and push of ethnic difference in Multicultural society.

"Squatter" features Sarosh who decides to emigrate and leaves Bombay for Toronto. The narrative focuses on the implications of migration, outlining the ways in which immigration can fail but also suggesting strategies by which it might succeed. While the usefulness of ethnic difference, i.e., the persistence of old conventions is interrogated by Sarosh in Canada, the frame of the story remains with an Indian setting as well as within a non-western tradition that in its reliance on the story telling and orality, emphasises difference as a tool for cultural survival. It is argued that "Squatter" confirms rather than undermines conventional assumptions of postcolonialism, with respect to cultural difference. It does not so much detail the negative side of retaining cultural difference, but foregrounds the positive effects of a politics of a difference explicitly (Nariman) as well as implicitly (Sarosh).

Sarosh, a Parsi who alters his name to Sid once he arrives in Toronto, cannot use a toilet in the western way. Being unable to sit on a toilet seat, Sarosh can only squat like an Indian once he feels the urge to relieve himself. "Morning after morning, he had no choice but to climb up and simulate the squat of our Indian latrines. If he sat down, no amount of exertion could produce success" (153). For an adequate understanding of "Squatter" it is crucial to ". . . consider the social and cultural ramifications of Sarosh's inability" (Heble, 52). The toilet habit becomes, metonymic of otherness in this story. The implied western reader of "Squatter" learns that there is no single way of attending to one's bodily functions. While defecating is natural and universal, the ways to defecate are cultural specific. Squatting becomes the sign of a different culture, a culture, moreover, in which sitting (rather than squatting) becomes the

marked case, i.e., the unusual way of defecating. Interestingly enough, as his toilet habits indicate, Sarosh's ethnicity is broadly Indian rather than specifically Parsi. It could be argued that in "Squatter" by way of a postcolonial counter discursive move, the exception becomes the norm and the cultural periphery the new centre. Mistry questions western assumptions by making strange what the western reader takes for granted. Thus what has been denigrated and devalued as eccentric and ex-centric is invested with new dignity in the context of an appreciation of otherness.

Although Mistry's literary techniques resemble postcolonial strategies, it is essential to realise that if one takes as a starting point for an interpretation of Sarosh's subject position, then "Squatter" departs from postcolonism in an important aspect. In marked opposition to the strategic value postcolonial critics' accord to metonymical inscriptions of otherness for the portrayal of other cultures, difference is not celebrated by Sarosh as liberating instead conceived as impediment. This is reflected in the persistence of old toilet habits as well as in Sarosh's failure to change his name to Sid. In "Squatter," names seem representative of different cultures in much the same way as toilet habits do. Sarosh's desire to cease to be Sarosh and to become Sid signifies a desire to become Canadian and thus a desire to erase the traces of his cultural difference. A similar case can be made with respect to toilet habits: for Sarosh a failure to defecate in the western style is equivalent to a failed immigration process. A new name and the wish to defecate like a Canadian, express, Sarosh's yearning to die a symbolic death as an Indian-Parsi as well as a wish to be reborn as a Canadian. In Sarosh's eyes, the processes of altering one's toilet habit are not equally and easily accomplished. Changing the former is regarded to be easier than using a toilet in the western style. The protagonist of "Squatter" projects defecating as a cultural practice more essential than naming. Sarosh identifies toilet habits with one's core identity, while names correlate to more peripheral aspects of identity.

Eventually "Squatter" deconstructs both names and toilet habits as valid indicators of identity. Part of Sarosh's problem is that he overestimates the effects of renaming, while underestimating its dangers. By renaming himself, Sarosh assumes he has made progress in his assimilation to Canada. The new name indicates the thirst for a new identity and thus for a self image that is stable and fixed. However, while there is no clue that the name Sid is rejected in Canada, the new name Sarosh has given himself in a new land, which is disdained in the old as well. Nariman, the story teller of "Squatter" refuses to acknowledge Sarosh's new identity and continues to call him Sarosh: "This Sarosh began calling himself Sid after living in Toronto for few months, but in our story he will be Sarosh and nothing but Sarosh, for that is his proper Parsi name" (153). Nariman who is connected with a different time and place, does not accept his protagonist's new name, thereby rendering questionable, the

change of names and identity from Sarosh to Sid, i.e., from Parsi to Canadian. Renaming as well as altering one's toilet habits correspond to a construction of new identity that is not truly lived, and thus will not be stable. Whereas the failure to defecate like a westerner prevents a successful assimilation in the eyes of the protagonist, therefore renaming proves deceptive. Misunderstood as a label rather than as a truthful reflection of one's identity, renaming suggests an easy transition to another culture when in fact no substantial change has taken place. Sarosh's fate demonstrates that Mistry's metonymical mode of narration is farcical. The story sees one superficial cultural practice, i.e., renaming, as compensation for another superficial cultural practice, i.e. defecating. Implicitly, Sarosh wants to shed his old identity because he regards a change of identity as a prerequisite for getting ahead in Canada. The double entity of Sarosh makes evident, the shedding of his identity is unsuccessful, the result of which is alienation and isolation. Culturally, he is alienated from the old without being able to adapt to the new. This is underlined once again by toilet habits: "There had been a time when it was perfectly natural to squat. Now it seemed a grotesquely aberrant thing to do" (162). The constant failure to use a toilet seat in an authentic western way results in feelings of shame and guilt: "Wherever he went he was reminded of the ignominy of his way. 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" (162). Guilt and shame indicate that for Sarosh, cultural difference as a Parsi and as an Indian is not a resource but an encumbrance: "He remained dependent on the old way, and this unalterable fact, strengthened afresh every morning of his life in the new country, and suffocated him" (154).

Overlapping with the perspective of the story, Nariman's narration overrides Sarosh's view and in diametrical opposition to the story's protagonist, advocates difference not as encumbrance but as resource. When Nariman interprets Sarosh's endeavours, as the wish to adapt, he is in fact mistaken. Sarosh does not want to become adapted, he wants to become assimilated, hence the wish to become Sid. Assimilation, however, is at odds with the theoretical formulations of Canadian multiculturalism that envisages unity in diversity and allows the immigrant to redefine himself on the basis of what he already is. In other words, multiculturalism does not demand that Sarosh erases his old identity; in order to become Canadian, assimilation is no prerequisite. On the contrary, Sarosh could have preserved his cultural difference and would have fully qualified as Canadian. Sarosh overlooks the fact that in a nation (Canada) built by and consisting of immigrants, difference constitutes the essence of national identity. By staying the way he had been, Sarosh would already have been as 'Canadian' as he could possibly become.

More about Canada and multiculturalism is learnt through the story's narrator Nariman. As a matter of fact, Nariman's angle on the multicultural society of Canadian is satirical; it is Swiftian in its

grotesqueness. Sarosh learns through his Immigrant Aid Society that his dilemma could be resolved through operation. As Dr. No-Ilaaz explains:

'A small device, *Crappus Non Interruptus*, or CNI as we call it, is implanted in the bowel. The device is controlled by an external handheld transmitter similar to the ones used for automatic garage door-openers – you may have seen them in hardware stores . . . You can encode the handheld transmitter with a personal ten-digit code. Then all you do is position yourself on the toilet seat and activate your transmitter. Just like a garage door, you bowel will open without pushing or grunting.' (160)

In employing metaphorical speech in order to illustrate the process of becoming Canadian, Nariman (as well as Mistry) question a purely mechanical view of identity formation. The Canadian Dr. No-Ilaaz, who, significantly, has not felt the necessity to change his name on arriving in Canada, does not recommend the operation because he knows that the CNI will not turn the Parsi-Indian Sarosh into a Canadian Sid overnight. Defecating in the western style signifies an understanding of Canadian identity no less questionable than a mere change of name. Although the CNI can help Sarosh modify his toilet habits, it does not make him less different. The irreversible implantation of the CNI will make him more Canadian only on the surface, while definitely making him less Indian at heart. As, Dr. No-Ilaaz puts it: "You will be permanently different from your family and friends because of this basic internal modification. In fact, in this country or that, it will set you apart from your fellow countrymen" (161).

For Sarosh, difference does not become a tool for constructing an identity. Identity is not based on difference because the very character of difference is misunderstood by the protagonist of Mistry's story. For Sarosh difference translates as alienation wherever he migrates to. "Squatter" describes a circular trajectory that eventually makes him emigrate again, this time from Toronto to Bombay. At the end of the story, he, who has called himself Sid in Canada, wants to be Sarosh again in India. As the narrator points out, a return is impossible: "The old pattern was never found by Sarosh; he searched in vain" (167). Although Sarosh has not become Sid, he nevertheless is no longer the man he used to be. This is to say, he has unlearned to be Parsi-Indian. Immigration leads him nowhere and makes him a casualty of a problematic relationship between interlocking cultural landscapes and that is precisely the Parsis' dilemma.

Instead of offering a new perspective, migration has only brought about displacement, uprooting and cultural dislocation. Forsaking India with the hope of finding a new home, Sarosh has favoured assimilation over adaptation. This is a mistake he pays for dearly by becoming permanently other, unable to turn any environment into home. Instead of having access to the best of both worlds, he no longer fully belongs to either of them. That Sarosh always remains alienated wherever he settles down is underscored once again by his toilet habits. Only when he has boarded the flight home is he able to defecate while sitting on a toilet seat.

In other words, only on the plane, i.e. technically neither in Canada nor in India, does he succeed in doing what he has tried to accomplish in vain for ten years. The solution to his problem is located in a space that is neither in India nor West. Thus eventually the dilemma of the in-between is only resolved in the in-between, i.e. for Sarosh not resolved at all. It is neither Canada nor India that fails Sarosh, but he wallows in self-pity and failure on account of a distorted image of what both countries expect of him.

Summing up, “Squatter,” is not a realistic depiction of the immigrant experience, but displays allegorical features. Nariman is not only the narrator, but also the author of Sarosh's story. Nariman tells “the sad but instructive chronicle of his (i.e. Sarosh's) recent life” (153) for a didactic purpose to the young Parsis. The central insight he wants to convey to Kersi, Viraf and Jehangir, i.e. to the young members of the Firozsha Baag. They are the ones who are most eager to emigrate. It concerns cultural difference as a Parsi, as the predicament of the immigrant cannot be denied because it is written on the body. Any attempt at trying to erase this difference will result in disorientation and uprooting. The point is that essential difference, i.e. difference written on the body, as expressed by the story's protagonist, is no tragedy; the real tragedy is the attempt to lose sight of one's difference in a new land. Nariman invents Sarosh in order to caution those Parsis leaving their homeland against trying to lose sight of who they really are. The reason for Sarosh's “. . . life in the land of milk and honey was just a pain in the posterior” (168) is that he has attempted to erase his identity as a Parsi: “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” (Heble 54).

Metaphorically conveyed, mistaking adaptation for assimilation has proved fatal because Sarosh, in the course of immersing himself in Canadian culture, has drowned in his wish for sameness. The attempt to be like others in Canada prevents Sarosh from perceiving that which distinguishes him from others. The desire to be identical to others erodes his identity as the unity of his self-sameness. A passion for a western identity overrides the fact that his identity is inevitably tied up with an awareness of difference. Nariman's interpretation of cultural retention differs from Sarosh's in an important aspect. He regards cultural difference as resource rather than as an encumbrance, as liberating rather than restrictive.

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