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NARRATIVE OF PLIGHT, IDENTITY AND SURVIVAL IN ROHINTON MISTRY'S
*SQUATTER, LEND ME YOUR LIGHT, AND SWIMMING LESSONS FROM TALES FROM
FIROZSHA BAAG*

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ABSTRACT

Parsi community is confronted with a menace of extinction due to variegated factors, which has led to the collateral emergence of ethnic identity among its members regarding its survival in the next century. The instinctual adaptability into their instantaneous ambiance has been a mainspring of survival for these dwindling community members who have been witness to the centuries of social and cultural cataclysms. Rohinton Mistry, being a member of the Parsi religious community in India, makes an attempt to pledge a glimpse into the life of the people of his community and their experiences as marginal in an eminently diverse society. The present paper closely scrutinizes the impasses, impediments, the challenges as well as the various strategies that the community has adopted for its survival through the cultural differences to retain their self-identity in the three stories *Squatter*, *Lend Me Your Light*, and *Swimming Lessons* from *Tales From Ferozsha Baag*. The characters in these stories symbolize the constant struggle between cultures and races and one's culture's desire to strive to remain (and to be seen as an) individual and strong while not being among your own people.

Key Words: Parsi Community, dislocation, immigrant, alienation, identity, survival.

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Rohinton Mistry is considered to be one of the dominant authors of Indian heritage writing in English. Born on 3rd July 1952 in Mumbai, Mistry is of Indian origin, but is currently residing in Brampton, Ontario, Canada. Like in India, Mistry has also been one of the leading writers in Canada, including Michael Ondaatje, M. G. Vassanji, and Neil Bissoondath, who are associated with India or other parts of South Asia. What sets Mistry apart, is his Parsi identity and his heart of the Parsiness in his writings. Having been lived in Toronto for long 27 years, his heart is still inclined to India, his first home. His books are still set in Bombay of his youth during the 1960s, 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, reinvented with perfect recall. He preserves countless memories of his early days in the country and finds it trouble-free enough to draw vivid details about India and India goes live through his works. He minutely captures the crowded, throbbing life of India. This Indianness in his writing when mixed with Parsi genes have had an impregnable influence on his growth and development as a writer.

Most of Mistry's creations mature a vision that necessitates the Parsis' community-centered extant and their participation with the extensive national framework. They have an "Ethnographic approach" to literature, in which the narrative is a basic tool used to make sense of his past experiences of his community. His novels portray the cultures and traditions of his community, and are reflective of the understanding of the Parsis in India. He is often admired for his special emphasis on the politics of India, for presenting an outsider's view and for being sensitive to human frailties. He is well versed with all the under currents of Indian politics, which leads him add many identified political events as part of his thematic concerns: Nationalism, politically motivated schemes, corruption, dominance of the Zamindars, caste-problem, and layman's sufferings. Besides, the divergent Mumbai culture, mainly the Parsi way of life, the loosing grip of religion, a sense of nostalgia, human relationship, fear and temptation, a feeling of alienation, a continuous appetite for identity and a sulk for existence are some of the major themes reflected through the pages of his novels.

Mistry's writings pledge a glimpse into the life of the people of his community and their experiences as marginal in an eminently diverse society. His novels *Such a Long Journey* (1991), *A Fine Balance* (1995), and *Family Matters* (2002) are all set in India's Parsi community. Some of his stories from *Tales from Firozsha Baag* highlight the dislocations experienced by his community members who move abroad to North America. Many Parsis who are highly qualified and extremely good in communication have no dearth of jobs abroad and find it easy to emigrate and settle in the white lands, leaving behind their declining status in post-colonial India and religion-based politics. On the other hand, their material success and prosperity of the people abroad often tempts others to join them. However, they remain naive of the fact that behind it lies endless struggle to survive, until they confront with the same themselves. For example *Swimming Lessons*, *Lend Me Your Light* and the incredible *Squatter*, which illustrate the issues encountered by emigrants in an uproarious yet attention-seizing manner. Within a framing narrative, Nariman Hansotia, the bag storyteller tells the local boys two stories: one about Savukshaw the great cricketer, and the other one about 'Immigrant assimilation difficulty', the story of the alienation of a Parsi immigrant to Canada, Sarosh the "squatter", which occupies more attention than the former.

Sarosh promises his mother that he will fully get adapted to the Canadian way of living within ten years of stay in Canada or return to Bombay. He succeeds in almost every way except one, i.e- to squat in "the Canadian way". The crisis of Sarosh's alienation that comes out of the amalgamation with the Canadian culture and his inexorable struggle as an immigrant to discover his own identity in a completely westernized society including the intricacies he faces in the course of integration and adaptation are well depicted in the story. At first Sarosh begins to call himself Sid after living in Toronto for a few months. But his failure to use a western toilet indicates a more severe discovery of identity, discrepancy, Canadian multiculturalism and xenophobia. Sarosh was so used to squatting that he could not adapt to toilets. However, he does not give up trying. Each morning he seated himself to "push and grunt, grunt and push", He discovers himself "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." He suffers this position, having "no choice but to climb up and simulate the squat of . . . Indian latrines", because "no amount of exertion [while sitting] could produce success" (p.185). As the language of the passage signifies, his posture does not fit with the space he occupies, and his inability to make it fit is emotionally debilitating, which results in the harassment of his 'waking hours' leading him to suffer from transcultural anxiety. With the passage of time "the frustrated attempts caused grave anxiety" as he "remained dependent on the old way, and this unalterable fact, strengthened afresh every morning of his life in the new country, suffocated him" (p.186) and the complete Canadian identity that he craved for becomes vague.

This reminds of V.S. Naipul's presentation of a post-colonial purview in his travel memoir *An Area of Darkness*. Naipul's experiences of ubiquitous squatters lead him to this conclusion: "Indians defecate everywhere. They defecate, mostly, beside the railway tracks. But they also defecate on the beaches; they defecate on the hills; they defecate on the river banks; they defecate on the streets; they never look for cover" (p.76). Naipul's deployment of the trope is typical of imperial narratives. His squatting Indians are degenerate

racial bodies; they are squatting, gaping anuses enacting their own negation. The body, in evacuating, is emptied of individual signification for the observer, who is repulsed or threatened by the uncontained nature of this behaviour. It is then resignified in a discursive system as an 'other body', allowing the observer to contain the threat it represents in a rhetorical cordon sanitaire that emulates the imperial boundaries established between rulers and subject people. Naipaul's explicit representations of squatters indicate the problem generally faced by postcolonial writers, who present excrement and evacuation. Warwick Anderson's article on American imperialism in the Philippines, "Excremental Colonialism: Public Health and the Poetics of Pollution," explains the process in terms that truly fits into this study. He discerns the colonial discourse producing the abject other and consolidating imperial territory in two discursive mechanisms: medical texts and toilets. According to Anderson, both played prominent roles in the consolidation of American control over the Philippines. The toilet was the principal means of containing the nightmarish threat of squatting Filipinos. The toilet answers the colonist's demand for a cordon sanitaire between clean American bodies and filthy Filipino ones. It is a system of enclosure, of capture, of physical and moral imprisonment and nevertheless a confessional of sorts, and the act of evacuation, a confession of filthiness and impurity. For Eustace, debasement tropes deployed by postcolonial writers, even in the service of their own resistant agendas, necessarily iterate colonial abjection. Representations of shit and shitting in the post colony remain degrading and are therefore problematic vehicles of resistance for postcolonial writers (2003, 29).

On the surface, at least, it seems that Mistry's "Squatter" is caught in the same quandary. The story shows the love-hate association that exists between the land and the immigrants. It begins with Sarosh in a compromised position, who soon discovers himself in a miserable situation on the failure of adaptation of Canadian culture. And when rejected immigrants fail to adapt to western cultures, they search desperately to find their former identity in their homeland. Similarly when Sarosh is not able to find a place for himself in the strange land, he comes back, but is unable to fall back into the life which he knew prior to leaving. He does not feel at home at either place and is left isolated. His failed attempts to use the western toilet as a sign of his inability to integrate clearly shows that what one has been brought up on is hard to forget. It is utterly difficult to get oneself acclimate in a strange land, which makes them feel isolated and nevertheless hampers everything else in their life like Sarosh's and barely lets them fall back into life again. Similarly when rejected immigrants fail to take up the western cultures, the quest to get their former identity in their homeland goes to the peak. Here the necessity for Sarosh to construct a homeland for himself amidst transnational spaces makes him go through immigration hardships with dignity. However, this effort backfires as the individual is persuaded subsequently by the western ethos that he is caught in an absolute disarticulation from both cultures, which leads to a kind of cultural clash within the individual.

One can infer that Sarosh's issues with western toilets are a sort of metaphor representing all immigrant troubles as a whole. Mistry uses satire and some symbolic imagery to convince his readers of the damage he feels, which is a result of hybridization. Heble reads Mistry's "Squatter" as a sensitive issue of immigrants experience. For him, "postcolonial identity is always already a hybridized formation," something Mistry's characters illustrate (Heble 1993, 53), and conclude that the emergence of writers of different ethnicities, such as Mistry, "indicates the necessity of moving beyond a nationalist critical methodology ... to a cross-cultural exploration of the discourses of hybridity"

On one hand, Mistry successfully gives the impression of an allegorical tale to describe the woes of an immigrant in a multicultural society through the character of Sarosh and on the other he portrays the strong influences of Westernization on the narrator, Nariman, who lives in another country for an extended period of time and returns to Mumbai, India with a new set of cultural attributes packed in his suitcase. The influence of Western consumer society and culture is manifested in his appearance and behavior. The western sophistication and elegance are indicated when he parks his "1932 Mercedes-Benz" outside A block and addresses it "the apple of his eye" (p.175). Nariman's humming of "Rose-Marie" and "The Bride on the River Kwai" (p.175), the famous Western hits from Broadway and the movies are also reflective of his attachment

with the western culture. Apart, his "Clark gable moustache" (p.176) and his fondness for sophisticated new n big words are the symbols of the classiness of English society.

Though revolving half around the narrator, the story is aptly titled in the name of the poor immigrant, Sarosh. A quote from another masterpiece of Mistry can be fitted best into this frame: "You have to use your failures as stepping stones to success. You have to maintain a fine balance between hope and despair. In the end it's all a question of balance". Eastern and Western cultures are very different to each other. So it is pretty difficult on the part of any immigrant to get himself acclaimed with various changes he faces in an alien land. This is what happens with Sarosh, who fails to maintain this balance between the two. Mistry beautifully depicts how "homeland-made" protagonists behave in a far of land either adopting or rejecting new cultural codes of their new "sense of place". In this regard, he also gives a try to establish the fact that Parsis find it really difficult to blend themselves well in the land of milk and honey. They, rather find it a never ending pain in the posterior, which leads to an insatiable quest for self-identity. On one hand, there is a desire of being true to their native culture, their homeland and to honor their dignity, on the other, an obligation to remain committed to the pledge. But paradoxically, unlike the Jews, the Parsis are destined to create their own homeland as the original one (Iran) is lost forever. They look at India as their second homeland, a place that had given them refuge in the time of aimless evacuation. The case of Sarosh becomes more important in this context as he comes back to India, a place more likely a cultural construct than an ethnic, or geographical reality.

According to Mistry, when one migrates, the initial optimism starts shrinking when it is followed by the reality of displacement, dislocation, and specially alienation. Along with this sense of loss, comes the realization of the loss of identity. In an interview in Wasafiri,, Mistry mentions his own idealistic expectations: "I left Bombay for Canada at the age of twenty three, and assumed before I got there that it would be no new thing for me. It would be a new land but I was sure I knew the language, that I would understand the culture and society". He realizes the fact that "it was all so very different" from the expected one, as any foreign land as imagined from a distant place can never be the same from within. This realization translates into a sense of disconnection from the land left behind and a sense of incompleteness in the land just arrived. The three stories *Squatter*, *Lend Me Your Light*, and *Swimming Lessons* from *Tales from Firozsha Baag* illustrate the same fact that dislocation forces the exiles to maintain a stronger link with their cultures, which either results in hybridity or behavior that challenges notions of cultural dominance, location, and identity.

In *Lend Me Your Light*, Mistry provides the readers with real life conflicts and pressure quite similar to those allegorized experiences of Sarosh in *Squatter*. The story surrounds the character of Jamshed, a friend of Kersi's brother Percy, whom Kersi admires at first. Jamshed belongs to a very sophisticated family, whose lunch is brought to school in a "chauffeur-driven", "air conditioned family car", and is eaten in the "leather-upholstered luxury of the back seat", which Kersi describes as "collection of hyphenated lavishness"(p. 210). However as a young Parsi, susceptible to the lure of the west and destined to immigrate to the western land, Kersi himself can be specified as one of those "hyphenated subjectivities" of Parsi diaspora. Both Jamshed and Percy have similar backgrounds, but a different opinion about their homeland. Jamshed is scornful of India and is too eager to leave the place and its problems for the new "promise land", U.S. He believes that he cannot expect a better future in India, a land filled only with corruption- "Absolutely no future in this stupid place...bloody corruption everywhere...First chance I get, I' m going abroad. Preferably the U.S."(p. 215). Thus he proceeds to assimilate to his new life, where he has successfully embraced the American life style and forsaken his Indian values left behind. On the contrary, Percy insists upon staying in India to fight against corruption in order to make his homeland a healthy place to sustain. Contrast to his thoughts, even his parents also believe that Toronto provides a lot of opportunity to grow than India. According to them, Canadian immigration authorities do not want hordes of barbaric Indians to apply for status- "who would want these bloody ghatis to come charging into their fine land?" (p.215). However, they are quite sure that Kersi, being a Parsi boy is a "highly qualified applicant" and would definitely get a chance to immigrate to his own place of desire.

Thus both Jamshed and Percy stand for two extreme points of view regarding their concept of migration and Kersi, who relinquish his dream to return to his homeland and settles down as a young writer, stands somewhere in between. He carries a feeling that he is both an insider and outsider in that land and is both native and foreign, who literary occupies the between-world position. He perceives life in a dual perspective, something that Rushdie calls "Stereoscopic vision" and there exists a double identity, culture, loyalty and even language. The narrative revolves around the acceptance of his identity, which is "at once plural and partial" and his straddling between two cultures. While Jamshed constantly valorizes the attributes of the West and does so while continuously finding imperfections with his homeland, Kersi feels guilt for leaving his homeland behind. It is evident that Kersi struggles to hold the contradictions of his own cultural hybridity. This cultural hybridity and the blurring of the boundaries of ethnic and religious identity are realities of minority existence and being a Parsi, Kersi is no exception.

The story outlines an endless struggle between community identity and dissolution of boundaries. The process of self-examination and personal adaptation takes its own ground on the basis of an identity that results from the interaction of memory and present experience, leading to an ambivalent consciousness. Mistry, through his characters, skillfully reveals the tension arising among Parsi individuals both in Indian society, where they are often excluded by the predominant Hindu and Muslim populations, and in Western nations.

The same atmosphere prevails in *Swimming Lessons* too, where the narrator parallels his life in Toronto with reminiscences of past events in Bombay, while trying to hold on to both at the same time. Like the two stories already mentioned earlier, *Swimming Lessons* also focuses on the issues often seen in the life of a new immigrant: loneliness, racism, and cultural adjustment, through a not so thinly veiled autobiographical character, Kersi, the Indian immigrant protagonist of Mistry. An important feature of the story is the setting that moves with the narrator from Bombay to Toronto and allows Mistry to draw an adroit equivalence between the lives of the residents in both of these crowded, multicultural urban settings through the use of parallel stories, imagery and effective diction.

The story efficiently reflects the predicaments followed by the transition of an immigrant struggling to fit himself in that alien land. The story takes place in an apartment complex in the Don Mills suburb of Toronto, its elevator lobby, its parking lot, and, revolves around the protagonist, Kersi, who ventures out to take swimming lessons in the local high school pool, the very first baby step towards integrating with Canadian culture. On being joined as an outsider, Kersi feels that the place is "the hangout of some racist group, bent on eliminating all non-white swimmers, to keep their waters pure and their white sisters unogled" (p.288). The pool is therefore, served as a metaphor for diving into a higher class free of impurities, a symbol of Canadian assimilation, which carries no place for non-whites. It is reflective of a strong dislike for immigrants, racism and stereotyping, which are evident when three young boys treat Kersi as an inferior simply by looking at his skin color while he is changing in the bathroom before his swimming lesson- "One of them holds his nose. The second begins to hum, under his breath: Paki Paki, smell like curry. The third says to the first two: pretty soon all the water's going to taste of curry". Kersi realizes that he has become a victim of unfair generalization like many other immigrants. The fear of swimming lessons is then cumulated with how others will receive him, and this gets him off to a bad start by the boys' crass association of his color with 'curry'. This is something that Kersi really finds difficult to cope up with, to find dignity as a brown immigrant in an alien land. As he used to use the term "Ghatis" in India for low class, inferior people to discriminate them from his own class, his own community as he believes that Parsis have been privileged citizens and thus are the perfect lense by which we may assess with reference to post-colonial India, whereas the Ghatis are the low class people belonging to the rural areas of Bombay, generally unaccepted by the civilized upper class communities because of their ethnic, economic and ethical inadequacy. Jacqueline, an inhabitant of Tar Gully in *The Ghost of Firozsha Baag* makes a reference to such ghathi people. Now when Kersi is an immigrant to Canada, he has become a kind of *Ghati* unconventional to its people and their culture, who consider the advent of Parsis and other Indian immigrants as the racial corruption of their society. Mistry represents the voice of immigrants and emigrants to throw light

on the challenges they have to face for their color differences, their struggles and problems that they encounter in a foreign land and nevertheless has included his own community, which has always been a victim of such disasters.

Kersi is haunted by much possible trepidation: he fears drowning, which may allude to a fear of rejection from a new community, a “symbolic death”. He understands that he must learn how to ease into the water, and to float before diving. There is also more than the fear of “failure of rebirth”- rebirth as a transformed immigrant, who is well adapted to the new environment. This is apparent in Kersi’s words when he said “Failure to swim through filth must mean something other than the failure of rebirth” (p.289).

Besides, the story also provides an insightful observation about Kersi’s erotic eruptions, which is positively shifted to his memories. Kersi is candid about his erotic urges as he describes spotting two women sunbathing in bikinis beside the parking lot. He recounts a conversation with the attendant at the pool registration desk in which he explains his “non-swimming status” and she in turn explains why she never learned to ride a bicycle. This is followed by a long passage of memory based on incidences of swimming, water, and religious festivals relating to water in the narrator’s life before immigrating to Canada. The use of the hyperbolic words ‘magic’ and ‘lustrous trick’ are reflective of how Kersi feels a sense of wonder looking at the women in bikini, and it seems a terrible thing when it is over. We get a bright example of appearance versus reality, which is similar to the shifting of the story between Kersi and his parents reading his letters and manuscripts. Just like the women, who appear to be beautiful, but are pretty opposite, so is the case with how Kersi’s parents perceive him. They thought he would be happy, comfortable and successful in Toronto until they came across the manuscripts authored by their son- a skill they did not know he possessed. As he keeps relying on writing stories to give a way out to his suffocations and anxiety, they have become the expressions of his unhappiness, his failed religious acquaintance, nostalgic feelings about Bombay basically revolving around his own community and most importantly alienation that keeps haunting him every now and then.

Kersi seems to be exposed to the wrong people, and clearly desires more intellectual interactions, such as with the old man who eventually dies at the end, leaving behind a wakeup call for Kersi. This is followed by a strong consciousness that he alone must be willing to try to integrate into the Canadian society. While the two settings are literally worlds apart, the characters of “Swimming Lessons” in the end give an analogous impression to their Indian counterparts in a gloomy, miserable, petty, and often humorous attempts to find dignity and human connections in the isolating pictures of the modern urban apartment living.

These three stories are super layered, providing the reader with many images representing the dichotomy of the Indian versus the Canadian (Western) culture. Each of them employs a different narrative technique and a different vantage point in order to present a diversity of experiences of Indian emigrants and also illustrates how the experience of migration and journeyings can estrange the migrant from both the old-world and the new one. However, they echo some of the themes quite steady throughout the entire collection; explicitly, the blurring and dissolution of boundaries, the process of self-examination in the continuous process of personal adaptation and an intense sentiment of alienation leading to a more serious exploration of identity. All these elements weave in together to create a portrait of an immigrant struggling to fit in a land not fully prepared to accept him. *Squatter* provides links to the imperial discourses underwriting Sarosh’s sense of displacement and imprisoning him in an abject ethnic framework that shouts out loud to reveal itself. The central metaphor seems to be a debasement trope, its representations of evacuation consistent with other postcolonial representations of the same. Sarosh’s story operates within a comparable set of discourses, with the distinctive goal of harnessing Parsi fears of displacement to regulate emigration. *Lend Me Your Light* offers a real-life equivalent for those allegorized experiences of Sarosh. Kersi turns to nostalgia and fantasy to assuage the loneliness and alienation he feels. This nostalgia is generally for a past way of life, forever lost to the main characters. It is occasionally manifest in the idealization of religious rituals which are seen as a way to preserve the past and prevent the disintegration of the family and the community. In *Swimming Lessons*, he has trouble adjusting with his new life in Canada and feels dislocated.

Caught between two worlds, the characters try to discern, construct, and shape new subjectivities. Although Parsi identity is central to all the stories, the characters live in a world of cultural fusion. They symbolize the constant struggle between cultures and races and one's culture's desire to strive to remain (and to be seen as an) individual and strong. Similarly, the writer, often contemplated as doubly displaced, confronts and typifies cultural hybridity and is in a steady state of transformation in order to accomplish a multifaceted and comprehensive identity.

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