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‘Throbbing between two lives’:  
the structures of migration in  
*Tales from Firozsha Baag*

the further they go, the more they’ll remember, they can  
take it from me (*TFB*, 72)

IN 1987, Rohinton Mistry’s first volume, a collection of linked short stories, was published in the United States as *Swimming Lessons and Other Stories from Firozsha Baag*, and in Canada and the United Kingdom as *Tales from Firozsha Baag*. It contained the two Hart House Prize-winning stories, ‘Auspicious Occasion’ and ‘One Sunday’, but also, in retrospect, can be seen to have introduced themes, symbols and techniques that recur in his later writings. These include topics such as families and their often spiky internal politics: a sense of entrapment and the desire for escape; memory and the pull of the past; the body, its functions and inevitable decay; connections between individuals, and often abortive attempts at communication; the search for balance amidst life’s turbulent elements; the use of parallel characters; the slipperiness of language; and the redemptive power of storytelling. Although many of these interests were to receive a more extended treatment in his subsequent novels, they can all be seen at work in the lives of the characters who inhabit the eponymous Bombay apartment block. Indicative of Mistry’s style is a subtle, but increasingly sophisticated and insistent, temporal weaving of past and present, enabling an exploration of characters and their motivations, and of the intricate tangle of cause and effect which directs events on both personal and national levels. Likewise, symbols are never static in Mistry’s writing. Places, water, music, the weather, cooking,

sport, journeys and journeying, and, above all, Bombay itself, enjoy shifting symbolic resonances as they appear and reappear within and across the texts. Their significance changes (and is sometimes even inverted) as the writer – both the real, corporeal personage, Rohinton Mistry, and that author implied by, and occasionally involved in, the text we are reading – seeks to grasp the complexities of experience and turn them into narrative.

Mistry's characteristic tone is even and engaging, detached but sympathetic, finding wry humour in serious situations, even managing to trace the lineaments of the absurd in the tragic, but also drawing profound lessons from apparently trivial incidents and encounters. Yet it is at certain points also marked by almost whimsical flights of exaggeration, satire and meta-fiction which carry the narrative high above the variegated, textured landscape of a prose filled with particulars and quotidian detail: one thinks of Nariman Hansotia's rampant imagination as he spins his yarns in 'Squatter', or the last story, 'Swimming Lessons', where the narrative's 'fourth wall' is broken as the narrator's parents read the stories we too have been reading. Yet such moments are darker and more serious than mere whimsy, and they often act to expose the difficulties and sometimes delusions involved in fiction-making, whether in the seemingly innocent attempt to create order out of chaos in one's personal life, or – in Mistry's later work – as part of a smokescreen of propaganda and disinformation on the governmental level.

As this may suggest, a distinctive feature of Mistry's style is his deployment of irony. The gentle humour he extracts from characters' foibles and the absurdity of the situations in which they frequently find themselves at times recalls that other Indian master storyteller R. K. Narayan. In *Tales from Firozsha Baag* irony takes the form either of a knowing relationship between characters – as when the older boys in the Baag appreciate the serious message of Nariman's stories which goes over the heads of his younger listeners – or a conscious invocation of literary heritage(s) as the narrator distances himself from his characters or from his younger, more naïve, self. Moreover, one can trace a political dynamic in the ironic register. According to

Linda Hutcheon, irony is a particularly appropriate vehicle for writing from the margins of a host society. In the context of so-called 'immigrant' or 'ethnic' writing in Canada, it becomes an expression of the inherent doubleness of identity, a way of establishing one's difference from the dominant discourse, of operating within its parameters while, at the same time, subverting it. She says, 'irony allows "the other" to address the dominant culture from within that culture's own set of values and modes of understanding, without being co-opted by it and without sacrificing the right to dissent, contradict and resist'.<sup>1</sup> So, in the form of the linked story collection, or short story cycle, Mistry appears to have adopted one of the most fruitful and appropriate forms for an exploration of hybrid and fragmented identities.

Forrest L. Ingram, a pioneering critic of the genre, defines the short story cycle as, 'a set of stories linked to each other in such a way as to maintain a balance between the individuality of each of the stories and the necessities of the larger unit. ... [and where] the reader's successive experience of the whole significantly modifies his experience of each of its component parts'.<sup>2</sup> There is no clear consensus as to when the short story cycle form began. Some critics claim the connected stories of Homer's *Odyssey*, Boccaccio's *Decameron*, Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* and the *Thousand and One Nights*, as precursors. Others locate the genesis of the form very specifically in the nineteenth century, with Dickens's *Sketches by Boz* and Turgenev's *A Sportsman's Sketches*.<sup>3</sup> Such debates over origins are always subjective to an extent, and, in the case of the short story cycle, depend on how one evaluates the internal connections of a given volume. However, there is more general agreement about the concurrence of the genre's popularity with the rise of literary modernism. (Joyce's *Dubliners* is always cited as the definitive example of this confluence and it appears to have influenced some of Mistry's themes and techniques in *Tales from Firozsha Baag*.) The short story cycle's use of fragmentation, foregrounded symbolism and epiphanic revelation, and a differently inflected version of conventional, teleological plotting has proved especially

attractive to writers with an oblique relationship to established literary traditions.

The short story cycle contains features such as thematic and symbolic patterns of recurrence and development, and is often structured and given unity by events occurring in a particular locale. Such locales can be so vividly realised, and impact so strongly on the characters who inhabit them as almost to constitute a character in their own right: examples include the American deep south in Faulkner's *Go Down, Moses*, Joyce's Dublin, and, here, Mistry's Firozsha Baag.<sup>4</sup> The sequence of stories also sometimes traces the psychological and intellectual development of a particular character from childhood to maturity. Finally, time is often depicted as cyclical rather than linear, with repetition and variation of situations allowing for a deepening of perspective on key themes: in *Tales from Firozsha Baag*, the stories 'Squatter', 'Lend Me Your Light', 'Exercisers' and 'Swimming Lessons' explore feelings of entrapment by replaying the ambiguous attempts to escape of various characters at different points in time. Eschewing the comforts of linearity and neat resolutions, short story cycles make demands on the reader, requiring that he or she look for unifying elements between stories and across the volume as a whole, elements the writer may have left implicit.

In fact, as Gerald Lynch makes clear, the short story cycle has proved particularly attractive for Canadian writers.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, its formal hybridity – part story collection, part novel – makes it a suitable medium for articulating what Rocio Davis calls the 'between-worlds' position of the 'ethnic' or migrant writer, and indeed of the postcolonial condition in general.<sup>6</sup> This is a quality Mistry takes full advantage of as he crams *Tales from Firozsha Baag* with quotes and paraphrases from, and allusions to, a variety of literary traditions from India, Britain, Ireland, France, Russia and ancient Persia.

The stories in *Tales from Firozsha Baag* describe a sequence of events, mediated through a shuttling temporality, taking place over the space of several years in the 1960s, during which the main recurring protagonist, Kersi Boyce – who also turns

out to be the narrator who assembles the stories and effectively 'writes' the book we are reading – grows from youth to maturity. Thus, the stories describe and enact the sometimes uncomfortable journey from innocence to experience, as well as, in the later tales, from Firozsha Baag to Canada. In true short story cycle fashion the volume is constructed in such a way as to show how the lives of the Baag residents are connected beyond the individual narratives in which they may be personally involved. Each tale contains references to other characters and their experiences in other stories in the volume, experiences we have read about previously or will encounter as we read on. This adds resonance and contributes to that sense of a larger, unifying pattern, which the attentive reader will recognise on completing the text. Characters such as Najamai, Rustomji-the-curmudgeon and Jehangir Bulsara seem to stroll through each other's stories as easily as if they were strolling through the apartment block itself. There is a mix of first and third person narration and characters often throw the light of personal reflection over events narrated, sometimes by others in other stories. In effect, what we have is a series of linked stories which, taken together, create a kind of novelistic superstructure, and although individual tales can be, and have been, extracted and anthologised, no individual story is 100 per cent freestanding. One critic has described the shape of *Tales from Firozsha Baag*, which reproduces on the formal level the community that inhabits the compound, as 'the book as an apartment building'.<sup>7</sup> Yet, if the volume replicates a notion of community, it is also able to illuminate some of the darker corners of lives otherwise lived in full view of the neighbourhood: as when we are privy to the tender private memories of Daulat Mirza as she comes to terms with the loss of her husband and the communal pressures to observe the public cycle of the Parsi mourning ritual in 'Condolence Visit'; or to Jehangir's anxious struggles to reconcile his own sexuality with the expectations and stifling attentions of his mother in 'Exercisers'. Nor is community merely celebrated. Mistry parodies the excesses of Parsi exclusivity in stories such as 'Auspicious Occasion', with its sneering protagonist

Rustomji brought down to earth by an encounter with the India from which he has tried to cut himself off, and 'The Paying Guests', where Boman's communal pride prevents him from asking the Baag's sole Muslim tenant to testify against his fellow Parsi 'squatters'.

On the level of the volume as a whole, one can trace a growing sophistication in the narrative style, especially in the use of temporal fluidity – past and present are intermingled in increasingly intricate ways – reflecting the growing personal and literary awareness of the writer-protagonist, Kersi. From Nariman Hansotia's deceptively simple but actually multi-layered stories in 'Squatter', to Kersi's wary consciousness of the easy allure of clichéd fictional resolutions in 'Lend Me Your Light', the art of the storyteller is foregrounded. Indeed, the last few stories, describing what, to borrow and mangle George Lamming's phrase, one might call the pressures of exile, are not merely about the experience of double-edged cultural translation, but also about how one narrates such experiences. In view of the structure and degree of sophistication outlined here, Mistry's chosen epigram from one of Henry David Thoreau's letters, 'Not that the story need be long, but it will take a long while to make it short', seems particularly apt.

Writing of one favoured mode of arrangement for short story cycles, J. Gerald Kennedy notes that, 'Small clusters of three or more stories may give special attention to a particular idea ... [while others] may be yoked by formal or thematic features so that they comment explicitly upon each other'.<sup>8</sup> This seems an apposite observation with regard to *Tales from Firozsha Baag*. So, for the convenience of study, it has been chosen to treat the eleven stories in the volume according to the four dominant sets of concerns discernible. It should be noted that such divisions are inevitably arbitrary since themes raised and devices used in the first story recur throughout; they merely force themselves on the attention to differing degrees in different stories. However, it is possible to break the volume down into the following manageable units: the first three stories, 'Auspicious Occasion', 'One Sunday' and 'The Ghost of Firozsha

Baag' each deal with kinds of isolation from surrounding environments, and are to do with vulnerability and outsider status; 'Condolence Visit', 'The Collectors' and 'Of White Hairs and Cricket' introduce the inevitability of death and attempts to come to terms with change and loss; 'The Paying Guests' and 'Squatter' focus on belonging and the spaces protagonists would call home but, for one reason or another, are unable to; and the final triptych, comprising 'Lend Me Your Light', 'Exercisers' and 'Swimming Lessons', interrogate the experiences of migration, exile, return and unsuccessful attempts at escape. (It would certainly be possible to make a strong case for 'Squatter' belonging in the last category too, but as there are specific issues regarding narrativity and cultural influence I wish to address through this story, it seemed preferable to place it in another category.)

### Outsiders: 'Auspicious Occasion', 'One Sunday' and 'The Ghost of Firozsha Baag'

'Auspicious Occasion' introduces us to the crumbling world of Firozsha Baag, and to one of its most irascible inhabitants Rustomji, dubbed 'the curmudgeon' by the local wag Nariman Hansotia. It also introduces us to the insular, tradition-bound world of Bombay's Parsi community, as Rustomji and his wife Mehroo prepare for the important *Behram roje* celebrations.<sup>9</sup> Rustomji is sixteen years her senior and already wearing dentures. He pretends indifference to the ceremonies his wife cherishes, but secretly enjoys the element of display which festivals such as *Behram roje* allow, as he dons the ceremonial Parsi dress which marks him out as different from the predominantly Hindu India that surrounds him.

The story begins as the couple prepare for their visit to the fire temple. The rituals and superstitions surrounding this most auspicious occasion – the concern that everything be just right and to avoid unwanted distractions – illustrate the central conundrum facing the Parsis in the modern world: how to

balance the requirements of tradition with the need for change to keep up with modernity. The retrospective urge, which in the Parsis is often linked to anglophilia and which the story reveals to be central to Parsi identity in postcolonial India, is symbolised by Rustomji's lament that two of Britain's most valuable legacies, Lifebuoy Soap and Johnnie Walker Scotch, are now only available on the black market. If Rustomji is, to a certain extent, living in the past it also seems that the Baag itself has seen better days. The building is decaying badly. Their flat bears the imprint of last year's rains in damp patches on the walls and, much to Rustomji's chagrin, the upstairs toilet is leaking in a steady drip that disturbs his morning motion. As someone who values regularity of all kinds he is discomfited by the drops of water which spatter his head, befouling him on a day which demands from the faithful a particular attention to purity. Dismissing the idea of using his neighbour and arch-enemy Nariman's lavatory – in an image that anticipates the central conundrum of 'Squatter' we learn that, 'his bowels were recalcitrant in strange surroundings' (*TFB*, 7) – he anticipates constipation 'with perverse satisfaction'.

The Parsi sense of separateness from, and superiority towards, other Indians is represented by Rustomji's nonetheless ambivalent attitude to the Indian servant who comes to clean their flat. He thinks of Gajra as a *gunga*, the generic and somewhat patronising name bestowed by some Parsis on their non-Parsi servants, a racialised slur anticipating his hurling of the pejorative '*ghatis*' at the crowd that surrounds him later. Yet there is desire as well as condescension in his attitude to the voluptuous Gajra, and he engages in covert sexual fantasies as he watches her work, perhaps indicating a latent desire for acceptance by this symbol of unalloyed Indianness. However, the sense of a fundamental separation of the Parsis from their surroundings is most vividly epitomised in the use of the colour white. The couple's special attire – his *dugli* and her sari – is spotlessly white. Whiteness here operates as both a traditional symbol of purity prescribed by religion, but also a visual signifier of the attempt to remain unsoiled by the bustling, chaotic swirl



of humanity that is Bombay. Rustomji in particular relishes the elegance of his white *dugli*, his external fastidiousness an indicator of self-worth. We learn that on his way to the fire temple, 'he decided to pass the H route bus stop and walk further, to the A-1 Express, past Tar Gully and its menacing mouth. His starchy whiteness aroused in him feelings of resplendence and invincibility, and he had no objection to the viewing of his progress by the street' (TFB, 16). Suitably armoured Rustomji pushes his way to the front of the bus queue. However, his composure is about to be shattered. As he descends from the bus a *paan*-chewing mouth from the upper deck emits a stream of red juice which catches him 'between the shoulder blades: blood red on sparkling white', sending him into a paroxysm of rage, and he starts 'screaming as painfully as though it was a knife in the back' (TFB, 17). Rustomji vents his ire on the curious crowd which has gathered around, drawn by his bellowing, berating them as 'sisterfucking *ghatis*'. But the mood of the crowd quickly changes and Rustomji is man-handled, threatened with violence and has his festival finery pulled off in a symbolic disrobing. In immediate danger from the angry mob he hits on the only escape strategy available, one that punctures the assumed stance of superiority he has so carefully been cultivating all morning. As sometimes happens in a school playground, so here the weaker party escapes through comedy and self-mockery. He spits out his dentures: 'The collapsed mouth and flapping lips appeased everyone. A general tittering spread through the assembly. Rustomji the clown was triumphant. He had restored to himself the harmlessness of the original entertaining spectacle' (TFB, 18). This moment has been seen as an instance of Mistry consciously reworking the well-known stereotype of the Parsi *bawaji*, beloved of Indian film directors for generations. Tanya Luhrmann describes how this figure is typically 'an old, eccentric man, the kind of elderly man who needs to get off the bus, battling his way to the door, at exactly the wrong moment for everyone', while Nilufer Bharucha reads this incident as symbolising 'the social decline of the "Bawaji", who in the British Raj was a

“sahib”, but has now become a figure of fun; somebody who can be spat upon with impunity’.<sup>10</sup>

Meanwhile, Mehroo has made her way to the fire temple ahead of her husband, only to find the gates locked and police swarming everywhere. It transpires that the priest, *Dustoor* Dhunjisha, has been murdered, ‘stabbed in the back’ by an attendant at the fire temple whom he had interrupted in an attempted theft. Of course the phrase ‘stabbed in the back’ takes on a figurative as well as a literal dimension in this context: the real horror is that *Dustoor* Dhunjisha has been murdered by a fellow Parsi: the ultimate betrayal for a beleaguered minority. Suddenly, a sense of moral and communal decay is added to the personal decay of the aging Rustomji and the structural decay of the Baag buildings. Returning home disconsolately, Mehroo suffers another shock when, on entering, she spies her husband’s discarded *paan*-stained *dugli* and mistakes it for the blood-stained vestments of the murdered *dustoor*. In this symbolic misrecognition, Rustomji is momentarily conflated with the dead priest, accentuating the sense of a community under attack from elements in the uncomprehending outside world and, more worryingly, from uncontrollable forces within. ‘Auspicious Occasion’ strongly conveys the Parsis’ internalised sense of siege as a marginal entity in a populous nation. It also prepares us for the later struggles by the next generation to break free from the stifling confines of what the text depicts as an introverted and hidebound, if fiercely loyal, community.

The security derived from repetition and routine is again a feature of the next story, ‘One Sunday’. Here the predictable events of an ordinary Sunday, on which the middle-aged widow Najamai goes to visit her sister’s family in Bandra, leaving her upstairs flat in the care of her neighbours, are upset by the alleged theft of eighty rupees. The prime suspect is the local odd-job man, Francis, who sleeps under the awning of a nearby shop, waiting to assist any of the Baag residents for the sake of a few *paise*, and whom the Parsis consider ‘really no better than a homeless beggar’ (*TFB*, 30).

Mistry establishes the interconnectedness of Baag life as he

describes the mutual dependence of Najamai and her neighbours. She allows Tehmina from next door and the Boyces from the floor below to use her refrigerator to store their meat and much-needed supplies of ice, while they receive her morning deliveries of bread and milk and let her borrow their newspaper. However, here again, as in 'Auspicious Occasion', the quotidian markers of habit are rent by an unexpected intrusion of terror. Francis is surprised behaving suspiciously by Najamai on her return. She screams in shock and he immediately bolts into the surrounding streets. At the same time, Silloo Boyce's son Kersi – perhaps *the* central figure of the volume as a whole, here introduced for the first time, but at this stage in the third person – is repairing his much-used cricket bat. We learn that he formerly enjoyed playing cricket and marbles and kite-flying with Francis, much to the dismay of his parents, who find it inappropriate for a good Parsi boy to be fraternising with one so much beneath him. Kersi's cricketing ambitions are in the process of yielding to a more adolescent set of concerns and urges, and childish pleasures have given way to teenage ennui. For Kersi, the deadening emptiness of Sunday routine is suddenly interrupted by Najamai's frantic cries for help and, bat in hand, he rushes to her aid, stimulated by heroic fantasies.

The pursuit, also involving Kersi's older brother, Percy, takes them out of the compound gates and into Tar Gully. Tar Gully is in certain respects the antithesis of Firozsha Baag, its dark, disturbing double, a place of poverty, dirt and crime to contrast with the order and regularity of the Parsi enclave. It is a predominantly Hindu space – it even has a resident sacred cow – and its inhabitants spit on those passing through who consider themselves better-heeled than they. In a replay of Rustomji's encounter in the first story, the Gullyites taunt Kersi and Percy as 'Parsi *bawaji*', while they, in turn, determinedly ignore the 'bloody *ghatis*'. Yet, despite their differences, there is a conciliation of sorts which takes us to the heart of this story's concern with outsider status, as both the Tar Gully Hindus and the Firozsha Baag Parsis are united against their Christian prey, Francis, by the accusation of theft and the cry of '*Chor! Chor!*'

(‘Thief! Thief!’). Earlier we are told that Kersi’s cricket bat is nowadays used to kill rats in the Baag. As well as acting as symbols of that decay we have already encountered, rats are, significantly, vermin who intrude from outside, just as the non-Parsi Francis is felt to have gnawed his way into the trust of the Firozsha Baag tenants. With Kersi brandishing his cricket bat, the pursuit soon turns into a kind of sport, where the spectators eagerly become participants in the hunt. Francis is quickly apprehended, given a beating by the less scrupulous among his pursuers, and brought back into the presence of his accuser. Throughout the story there is a strong sense of Francis as a victim: no evidence is produced to prove the allegation of theft, and Najamai reflects on his ignominious return, ‘How silly they looked. Going after poor Francis with their big bats! As if he would ever have hurt them’ (*TFB*, 38). Significantly, the Baag’s solitary Muslim tenant takes the chance to ingratiate himself with his aloof neighbours by offers of sympathy to the wronged Najamai, while his servant aims a kick at the prone, quaking Francis. The whole incident, and particularly its disturbing denouement, illustrates the potential that exists for communities who themselves feel vulnerable as minorities to vent what little power they have on an individual from another minority. However, with the heat of the chase abating, Kersi finds himself succumbing to feelings of shame about his vainglorious part in hounding the powerless Francis. Back in his room he angrily smashes his cricket bat in disgust at himself. Along with the bat his fantasy of heroism, and the ideals of fair play enshrined in the game of cricket, are shattered too. With insider and outsider roles reversed, ‘One Sunday’ is a kind of mirror story to ‘Auspicious Occasion’. It is still a tale of victimisation of the weaker outsider, but this time by a community one might have expected to know better.

The next tale is told in the first person by the Goanese ayah of a professional Parsi couple who live upstairs in B Block. But as a devout Catholic, as well as a servant, Jacqueline (whose name is corrupted to Jaakaylee by Parsi mispronunciation) is, like Francis, something of an outsider despite her forty-nine years of

service. She observes how ayahs live close to the floor, grinding *masala* and chopping vegetables. Significantly, after attending midnight mass, Jaakaylee sleeps outside the flat, by the stairs, so as not to disturb her employers. It is here she witnesses the first manifestation of the ghost of Firozsha Baag.

One of the most striking features of Jaakaylee's narration is the vernacular style and her use and mixing of languages. Mistry captures the register of the half-educated, aging Goan servant as she laments in her idiosyncratic English, 'Nowadays my weight is much more than it used to be, and is getting very difficult for me to get up from floor. But I am managing' (*TFB*, 45). Her narrative is marked by untranslated words from Gujarati and Hindi, which puncture the stilted English, not merely adding 'local colour', but signifying 'a certain cultural experience which they cannot hope to reproduce but whose difference is validated by the new situation'.<sup>11</sup> The narrative conducts a low-key but probing interrogation of the issues of language and power – thereby anticipating a central theme of *Such A Long Journey* – as Jaakaylee recalls the process by which she was renamed:

All the fault is of old *bai* who died ten years ago ... Old *bai* took English words and made them Parsi words. Easy chair was *igeechur*, French beans was *ferach beech*, and Jacqueline became Jaakaylee. Later I found that all old Parsis did this, it was like they made their own private language ... I don't care about it now. If someone asks my name I say Jaakaylee. And I talk Parsi-Gujarati all the time instead of Konkani, even with other ayahs. Sometimes also little bits of English. (*TFB*, 44)

There is certainly a degree of alienation in this for Jaakaylee – she laments 'Forgetting my name, my language, my songs' (*TFB*, 45) – but her experience can also be seen as part of that cosmopolitan mixing resulting from the influx into Bombay in the 1950s and 1960s, which included 'Tamils and Keralites, with their funny *illay illay poe poe* language' (*TFB*, 46).<sup>12</sup> While there is no suggestion that linguistic dexterity has brought the central protagonist any advantages, Mistry's narration through Jaakaylee's voice, seems, in its very hybridity, to add an extra dimension

to Ashcroft, Griffith and Tiffin's well-known observations about postcolonial challenges to linguistic norms. Speaking of the deployment of the English language, they say, 'the most interesting feature of its use in postcolonial literature may be the way in which it also constructs difference, separation, and absence from the metropolitan norm'.<sup>13</sup> Here this challenge gains an extra dimension as the norms of the colonial language, English, and the Gujarati of her employers, are contravened by Jaakaylee's mix-and-match idiom.

At first Jaakaylee's reports of a ghost are dismissed by the Baag residents as the ramblings of an old woman from a backward part of the country where everyone believes in such things. However, interpretation for the reader is guided by the blend of Catholicism, sexuality and repression, woven into her narrative. The ghost first appears early on Christmas morning when Jaakaylee returns from midnight mass. We learn that the other, younger ayahs have gone off somewhere with their boyfriends. Her mistress and master, *bai* and *seth*, react with scepticism when awoken by their unnerved ayah. *Bai* is angry, but *seth* responds with good humour which Jaakaylee is soon able to account for: the audible creaking of their bed carries the sounds of intimacy, as the household settles down again. The next spectral visit occurs at Easter. This time the brazen apparition materialises in Jaakaylee's bed, 'sitting on my chest and bouncing up and down' (*TFB*, 46). Subsequent supernatural pranks include trying 'to put his hand up my gown or down from the neck', and we are told, 'For almost a whole year the ghost slept with me' (*TFB*, 48, 49). The ghost's antics spark a copycat incident in which Dr Mody's wayward son, Pesi, terrorises the nubile sisters Vera and Dolly by probing under their mini-skirts with the light from his clearly phallic torch. They also remind Jaakaylee of a childhood acquaintance called Cajetan – named after a local saint, but rather more of a sinner himself – whose shameless advances to the young Jacqueline had culminated in an incident at the beach. Her account is replete with sexual imagery:

He rolled up his pants over the knees and I pulled up my skirt, and we went in deeper. Then a big wave made everything wet. We ran out and sat on the beach for my skirt to dry ... Sitting on the sand he made all funny eyes at me, like Hindi film hero, and put his hand on my thigh. I told him to stop or I would tell my father who would give him a solid pasting ... But he didn't stop. Not until the fishermen came. Sheeh, what a boy that was. (TFB, 49)

The insistence of such circumstances is likely to alert the reader to the possibility of some form of repression at work. While there is no countervailing narrative to cast doubt on Jaakaylee's account, the nature of the ghost's activities is reminiscent of Henry James's novella, *The Turn of the Screw*, where the hauntings witnessed by an inexperienced and hysterical young governess seem just as likely to be the result of psychosexual repression as posthumous shenanigans.<sup>44</sup> Sure enough, her confession to the local Catholic priest, Father D'Silva, is immediately effective. Telling the story – and thus, perhaps, working off the associated feelings which have remained pent up in the unmarried ayah for all these years – drives the ghost away.

Jaakaylee's relation of the main events of the story is punctuated at points by italicised passages in which she comments on the process of making a good curry. As these interruptions continue, her strictures on how to produce the perfect Goan *masala* begin to sound also like a recipe for cooking up a tasty story: '*secret of good curry is not only what spices to put, but also what goes in first, what goes in second, and third, and so on. And never cook curry with lid on pot, always leave it open, stir it often, stir it to urge the flavour to come out*' (TFB, 54). These judicious instructions, along with the refrain 'believe or don't believe', accentuate the connection between cooking and storytelling that, on a second reading, appear to have been simmering all the way through. *Bai* comes to enjoy her stories and at the end asks Jaakaylee to sit with her at table and share a cup of tea, causing the latter to reflect that nowadays, 'She does not treat me like a servant all the time' (TFB, 55). As if to confirm the connection, *bai* asks for Jaakaylee's help in

performing a magic ritual to determine whether there is a ghost in the Baag, after she has mistaken the ayah, draped in a sheet for warmth one night, for the *bhoot* whose existence she has previously doubted. She now thinks of ghosts as the ayah's 'specialty'. Through her proficiency as a spinner of yarns, Jaakaylee finds herself, at the end, brought 'inside' and she becomes an 'honorary Parsi' as she assists in the séance-like ceremony. The haunted ayah of Firozsha Baag thus becomes the initiator of a long line of storytelling characters in Mistry's work, and offers the first example of Mistry's faith in the redemptive, communicative power of storytelling.

### Mortality and memory: 'Condolence Visit', 'The Collectors' and 'Of White Hairs and Cricket'

'Condolence Visit', 'The Collectors' and 'Of White Hairs and Cricket' share a concern with the operation of memory and the potential damage of holding on to that which must be allowed to pass away. In the first tale, we are once more plunged into the world of Parsi ritual. This time we are introduced to the correct sequence to be followed when in mourning. On the tenth day, or *dusmoo*, after the funeral of Minocher Mirza, the appropriate prayers have been said at the fire temple, and now, on the following day, his widow, Daulat, awaits with trepidation the inevitable arrival of visitors, taking advantage of the opportunity afforded them by calendrical convention to offer their condolences. She has thus far been careful to observe the niceties required of her. Yet now she is aware that she will have to recite the story of his last days to the condolence visitors, who will request it 'tenderly but tenaciously, as though it was their rightful entitlement' (TFB, 60). Already weary at the thought of reliving the painful recent past, she wishes she had taken advantage of her nephew, Sarosh-Sid's offer of the cassette player he has brought back with him from Canada. Then she could simply tape an account of Minocher's last days and replay it automatically for the sympathisers: 'When they held out their hands in the condolence-



handshake position (fingertips of left hand tragically supporting the right elbow, as though the right arm, overcome with grief, could not make it on its own)' (*TFB*, 61). The mechanical quality of these ritual requirements might as well have a mechanism to satisfy curiosity.

Here is a case where the oppressiveness of tradition and ritual weighs heavily. What is more, Daulat is pestered by her well-meaning but interfering neighbour, Najamai – whom we have met before in 'One Sunday', of course – who, on the strength of her own bereavement, has become the self-appointed authority on 'Religious Rituals And The Widowed Woman' (*TFB*, 62). She polices the observance of correct Parsi rituals concerning mourning, importuning Daulat with offers of extra drinks and seats to accommodate the anticipated deluge, and generally embodies culturally sanctioned notions of propriety. For instance, she tells Daulat never to sell the pugree belonging to her deceased husband, and wants her to extinguish the lamp still burning at Minocher's bedside, which has become a source of comfort to the grieving woman. Conventionally, the lamp is there to aid the journey of the soul to the next world, but leaving it to burn beyond the prescribed four days risks confusing the soul by distracting it. Yet, as the story shows, things of ritual can outgrow their conventional meanings. For Daulat, the lamp works as a conduit for memory. As she gazes into the flame, fragments of her life together with Minocher return like the fragments of old tickets and concert programmes she finds among his effects. She recalls her husband's surreptitious deposits of the food he can no longer stomach, in an Ostermilk tin behind the bed, and his more recent craving for oxtail soup: a last little luxury they share together. Thinking of these things, and earlier memories such as their mutual love of music, Daulat is able to begin to come to terms with loss in her own way.

The tension here is between private feelings and the culturally sanctioned public appearance (and consumption) of grief. In this respect, 'Condolence Visit' is reminiscent of Maupassant's short story, 'Family Life', which also examines the rituals attendant on death, the visit of mourners, the obligatory

tears and so on. Both stories explore the gap that exists between human emotion in bereavement and the observances sanctioned by society to mark a passing. These include what Maupassant, in a phrase also applicable to Mistry's subject matter here, calls 'the emblems and symbols which it is meet to set out in the presence of Death'.<sup>15</sup> (Of course, Maupassant, with his caustic view of human nature in general and of the French petite bourgeoisie in particular, uses the apparent death of Monsieur Caravan's mother to produce black humour about Madame Caravan's crocodile tears and pre-emptive greed, whereas Mistry's take on death rituals exhibits a more Chekhovian sympathy.)

Floating back from memory to the present, Daulat hears in the hush of the afternoon outside the mourning room a ragman passing by offering new things for old. She then resolves to give away Minocher's wedding pugree to a young man who has advertised for one in the newspaper, and who is due to come and inspect it that afternoon. The young man's plans for a traditional Parsi wedding offer to link the past and present that have been so recently sundered for Daulat, and give Minocher's pugree new life and significance. The act of giving up the pugree is symbolically linked to 'giving up' her dead husband. Daulat here acts spontaneously rather than according to notions of propriety. Now she finds she can also extinguish the bedside lamp and begin the process of healing.

The theme of an imposed duty to remember in a particular way versus a spontaneous response which answers the inevitable need to let go is also present in the equally moving but more complex tale, 'The Collectors'. From the start there is significant temporal fluidity in the narrative: a leakage of the 'present-of-narration' into the 'past-being-narrated' in the story. This shows a greater degree of sophistication on the part of the narrator, whose identity is still hidden from us at this stage. We are made aware of this as a retrospective narrative, partly through the tumbling temporality of the second paragraph, recalling Rushdie's helter-skelter, barely controlled time in *Midnight's Children* and *Shame*. We are told of the things Dr Mody did not know at the time of his arrival in Firozsha Baag:

Dr Mody did not know it then, but he would be seeing a lot of Jehangir, the Bulsara boy; the boy who sat silent and brooding every evening, watching the others at play ... Or that just when he would think he had found someone to share his hobby with, someone to mitigate the perpetual disappointment about his son Pesi, he would lose his precious Spanish dancing-lady stamp and renounce Jehangir's friendship, both in quick succession. And then two years later, he himself would – but that is never knowable. (*TFB*, 79)

This sophisticated opening, blending prolepsis (anticipation) and analepsis (flashback), provides what is virtually a synopsis of the plot, and does so in such a way as to direct our attention in this tale as much to the mode of narration as to what is narrated. Additionally, the story has a sectioned structure, the sections corresponding to the stages of Dr Mody and Jehangir's relationship: I, meeting and mutual interest; II, the beginning of Jehangir's stamp-collecting; III, the growth of his collection, but also his corruption by Eric D'Souza, the disappearance of the Spanish dancing-lady stamp for which he is blamed; and IV, Dr Mody's death, the bequest of his stamps to Jehangir and their destruction.

At first, Jehangir, quiet, contemplative and an avid reader, seems potentially a surrogate child for Dr Mody, to take the place of the perpetual disappointment that is his loutish and high-spirited son, Pesi. The latter's prodigious spitting and emissions of wind are matched only by his casual cruelty to animals: he organises games involving stoning the local cats – a particularly ironic pastime for the son of a vet – and he frequents the backyards that constitute the 'squalid underbelly' of Firozsha Baag. In a memorable deployment of 'Indianised' English we learn that 'Pesi was the worm in Dr Mody's mango' (*TFB*, 81). Little wonder, then, that the doctor attempts to live the fantasy of the life he has projected for his son, with the more temperamentally suited Jehangir. And this includes introducing him to his favourite hobby of stamp-collecting.

The stamps Jehangir admires in his Sunday morning sessions

with Dr Mody come from different parts of the world. They represent the outdoor life and the possibility of travel to foreign places, which it is unlikely he will ever see (this story takes on an additional resonance when we have read the later 'Exercisers', and realise just how complete the domestic stranglehold on this character really is). Dr Mody encourages Jehangir to make new friends and ask them to save stamps for him to help begin his collection. Collecting becomes a means by which to encourage the painfully shy boy to mix, but it also satisfies a mutual need, establishing a bond between these two lonely characters. However, as soon becomes evident, reaching out to others inevitably involves corruption. Jehangir is cultivated by his wayward classmate Eric D'Souza, whose burgeoning homosexuality soon involves Jehangir in 'not unpleasant' mutual masturbation sessions, in return for Eric stealing stamps for him from local stallholders. This arrangement is only disrupted by complaints from the traders and the threat of punishment from a prefect, after which Eric's attitude towards Jehangir changes dramatically, and he is forced to return many of the stolen stamps, and his collection shrinks pitifully overnight. Worse follows when, on his next visit to Dr Mody, he learns that the beautiful Spanish dancing-lady stamp, an object of admiration bordering on reverence for Dr Mody, has gone missing. The doctor interprets Jehangir's feeling of culpability about his recent misdemeanours as evidence of his guilt, and their relationship is promptly terminated. The Spanish dancing-lady stamp – with its alluring flamenco dancer – becomes an image, simultaneously, of perfection and the unattainable. Stamps in general, but this one in particular, form a substitute for Dr Mody's unsatisfactory relationship with his hectoring wife, who berates him for spending more time with Jehangir than with his own son, and appears to starve him of affection; it seems no coincidence that the doctor is to die 'of heart failure' on a trip to Ahmedabad. Kept in a special box and inspected with almost furtive excitement, Dr Mody's Spanish dancing-lady can be associated with the covert pleasures offered by Eric D'Souza. Dr Mody says, 'So you like my Spanish dancing-lady. Everyone who sees

it likes it. Even my wife who is not interested in stamp collecting thought it was beautiful. When I retire I can spend more time with the Spanish dancing-lady' (TFB, 93). As this stamp is so highly prized by both Dr Mody and Jehangir, it becomes that which can be turned against them and used to divide them. (We discover at the end that it is Mrs Mody, in her jealousy, who has removed and destroyed the Spanish dancing-lady.)

The events of 'The Collectors' take place over a more extended period than in previous tales. At the end of two years, the choric voice Mistry occasionally deploys to inform us of the common view of the Baag gossips informs us of Dr Mody's untimely death. Mrs Mody goes to Ahmedabad to escort the body back to Bombay for disposal in the Towers of Silence, but, unfortunately, during the journey the body begins to decompose in the heat. The theme of corruption and corruptibility which has been running through the narrative reaches a climax when Jehangir, who has reluctantly taken charge of what remains of the doctor's stamp collection at the behest of the tearful and contrite Mrs Mody, discovers, some months after storing his hoard in a trunk under the bed, that white ants and cockroaches have reduced the collection to dust. At this, Jehangir feels a 'sense of relief': relief from the burden of being obliged to remember in a particular way by Mrs Mody's bequest.

This ending carries strong echoes of the climax of Alice Munro's tale, 'Heirs of the Living Body', in her short story cycle, *Lives of Girls and Women*. There too the protagonist, Del, has a memento of her deceased Uncle Craig imposed on her by grieving relatives, in the shape of his painstakingly compiled history of Wawanash county. And, as with Jehangir's stamps, Del puts the manuscript in a box under the bed, later transferring it to the cellar where it is subsequently ruined during a flood. Her words on discovering the loss might also stand for Jehangir's sentiments at the end of 'The Collectors': 'I felt remorse, that kind of tender remorse which has on its other side a brutal, unblemished satisfaction.'<sup>16</sup> Both stories reflect on the impossibility of preserving the past, its memories and the personalities associated with it, through artefacts.

'Of White Hairs and Cricket' is more direct in its treatment of the attempt to come to terms with mortality and physical decline, although the retrospective element – the events are being recalled by the older Kersi, as we learn at the end of the book – add an extra poignancy to the sense of loss. The white hairs on Daddy's head which Kersi dutifully attempts to remove with tweezers, are signs of the inevitable process of aging, as is the fact that he can no longer play cricket on Sunday mornings with the Baag youth. These futile attempts to 'uproot the signposts of mortality' (*TFB*, 107) are linked to other images of decay and of efforts to frustrate the passage of time: like the baby on the outdated Murphy Radio Calendar, which partially hides a spreading patch of crumbling plaster on the Boyce's walls, who must now be the same age as Kersi, but who continues to present an 'innocent and joyous' smile to the world, defying all other time-bound entities; *Mamaiji's* painful weakness of the spine through which she is unable to stand fully erect, and which leads Kersi to contrast the 'big handsome woman' she once was to the frail figure in front of him; the temperamental Criterion and Primus stoves which date from the days of the British, and which seem to threaten the careless user with imminent cremation; and, finally, the father of Kersi's best friend, Viraf, who lies critically ill after a heart attack, and whose fate seems to enucleate all the losses of which life is composed. The story is perhaps a little relentless in its pursuit of instances of human entropy and the various 'enshroudings' that accompany them. The image of spinning things is held out as balm for Kersi: from *Mamaiji's* dexterous needlework or a favourite record on the turntable, to the exploits of Jasu Patel, the famous Indian spin bowler, who regularly bamboozled international batsmen. (Indeed, cricket in this story comes to symbolise and encapsulate time and loss, contrasting with its use in 'One Sunday' and, as we shall see, 'Squatter'.) The fate of Viraf's father provides a kind of Joycean epiphany about the facts of mortality for Kersi, who ends by lamenting his inability to communicate directly his love and gratitude to his father for all he has given him.

## Home from home: 'The Paying Guests' and 'Squatter'

Just as Sarosh-Sid is a 'squatter' during his ill-fated sojourn in Canada, so, in 'The Paying Guests', the eccentric Korshedbai and her long-suffering husband, Ardesar, become squatters in the more intractable sense. Korshedbai, with her faith in the nocturnal revelations of her pet budgerigar Pestonji, long disappeared or dead, appears partly to be a dry run for Miss Kutpitia and her magic spells in *Such a Long Journey*. The story begins towards the end of the events it narrates and loops backwards to fill in the history of the dispute between the young couple, Boman and Kashmira, who need some extra money, and the unstable tenants who take on the partitioned section of their corner apartment. It follows the progress of Korshedbai's 'dirty protest' – littering the shared veranda with banana skins, orange rind, potato peelings, pendulous gobbets of gristle, strips of newspaper and dog faeces – and the disruption of the old, peaceable way of life by the litigation set in train by Boman in his attempt to reclaim the rooms for his growing family. Korshedbai is compulsive and superstitious. She takes Parsi traditions to an extreme, insisting that Kashmira remain in confinement during her menses, and waking up at five a.m. for her morning prayer. The sole record in her possession, a paean to the rising sun, becomes a weapon in the feud and is cranked up at all hours to disturb the neighbouring couple to the maximum. Mistry places much of the emphasis on the psychological effects of the battle on both sides. Boman is rattled but imperious, while his wife fears that the stand-off may never end, and Korshedbai rejoices over her temporary court victory as Ardesar retreats, in his thoughts, to Chaupatty beach where he feeds the pigeons.

Bird imagery is at the forefront of this tale. Korshedbai is determined not to let Boman and Kashmira peck her to pieces; in her philosophy, in order not to be pecked, it is essential to get one's peck in first. Life for her is as brutal and ravenous as for any bird of prey. Meanwhile, the pigeons that offer the

therapeutic qualities of their cooing to Ardesar are, significantly, free to fly away, in contrast to the fetishised Pestonji who was caged. Moreover, there is a sense of inexorability about the train of events that culminate in Kashmira's new baby being stolen by Korshedbai and placed in the empty birdcage. Just as Pestonji was both talisman and child substitute for Korshedbai, so the new baby provides a focus for those instincts she has repressed and which have been warped.

In certain respects this is the weakest story in the collection: the ending is uncharacteristically melodramatic and the symbolism of the baby in the birdcage is rather obvious. However, it does serve to introduce the issue of what physical space one can call one's own, which comes to dominate the remaining narratives. And issues of belonging also entail questions of physical migration, as well as communal acceptance or rejection. The international dimension to this is explored in perhaps the most complex and satisfying of all the tales, 'Squatter'.

The play on the word 'squatter', in the story of that title, draws our attention not simply to its use in relation to an unwelcome intruder in a property or, as here, an unassimilated immigrant in a new country, but also to the only position in which the central character, Sarosh-Sid, can effectively evacuate his bowels. And, just as the title has a double meaning, so, too, the story as a whole displays a twofold concern. It is not merely about the disorientating experience of emigration, but also the power of language to encode these experiences in different story-types – heroic, epic, tragicomic and so on – and the role of listeners and readers in creating meaning. (As such, it takes us to the core concern of the volume, and Mistry's oeuvre, as a whole.)

Nariman Hansotia, the communal storyteller who beguiles the boys of Firozsha Baag with his tales, is especially adept at encoding experience in narrative form. After a ritual which involves tooting his car horn and polishing the Mercedes star on the bonnet to alert the boys, he launches into one of his amazing stories. His most sensitive listener Jehangir, also known as Bulsara Bookworm, admires the style and structure of Nariman's stories. In certain respects he may be seen as a kind of ideal



reader/listener every writer/storyteller has in mind. He describes Nariman's technique in terms that might also be applicable to Mistry:

Unpredictability was the brush he used to paint his tales with, and ambiguity the palette he mixed his colours in ... Nariman sometimes told a funny incident in a very serious way, or expressed a significant matter in a light and playful manner. And these were only two rough divisions, in between were lots of subtle gradations of tone and texture. Which, then, was the funny story and which the serious? Their opinions were divided, but ultimately, said Jehangir, it was up to the listener to decide. (*TFB*, 147–8)

This active engagement with interpretation is just one feature of the traditions of oral narrative invoked here. Listeners have an active role to play in the storytelling circuit. As an oral narrator, Nariman relies on a close relationship with his listeners. They, in turn, participate to the full, prompting, enquiring, egging him on, interjecting exclamations at appropriate moments. The boys who surround Nariman and clamour for a story join in the ritualised dialogue which critics have seen as central to the oral tradition. In an essay on Mistry's use of storytelling devices, Amin Malak has described what he sees as the distinctive features of oral storytelling transcribed in the novel *Such a Long Journey*, but which, in many respects, are more evident in 'Squatter'. Malak writes of 'A Sense of Audience': certainly present here as the boys give up their games of cricket and rough-and-tumble to come and hear Nariman's latest tale; 'A Sense of Heritage and Shared Values', which the community certainly has as Parsis; 'The Reliable Reporting of Private and Collective Memory', something Nariman demonstrates by claiming to recall personally the events he is describing – including his presence at Sarosh-Sid's 'welcome home' party – and the collective memory he evokes in the older boys of the voluptuous sisters Vera and Dolly; and 'The Blending of Modes and Moods', as when the listeners have the vague feeling that there is a serious message behind the humorous scatological story of Sarosh-Sid and his bowel problems.<sup>17</sup>

One of the most significant features of ‘Squatter’, and one which has not always received the critical attention it warrants, is the fact that what seems to be the main story, that of Sarosh-Sid and his difficulties in Canada, forms only the last part of the tale, the first half being taken up with the amazing feats of the incredible Savukshaw, Parsi cricketer, cyclist, pole-vaulter and hunter extraordinaire. Moreover, both stories are held in the frame narrative about Nariman Hansotia and his spellbinding storytelling skills. (As we shall see, this structure is actually even more complex than it first appears.)

As a cricketer and all-round sportsman, Savukshaw is a latter-day embodiment of those characteristics of manliness and physical vigour which Luhrmann sees the Parsis as having internalised from British public school models. She says, ‘Of all gentlemanly athletic pastimes, cricket was the most esteemed. It was fitting to the ethos and aspirations of the community that Parsis played cricket sooner and better than any other community.’<sup>18</sup> Yet, with his incredible skills and prodigious strength, Savukshaw also recalls the heroes from another of Mistry’s perennial sources, the *Shah-Namah*. In the great Persian epic, figures such as Sikandar, Afraisab, Asfandyar and, above all, Rustom, traverse the generalised landscape of ancient Iran, fighting battles, killing dragons, slaying demons and generally performing amazing deeds. There is more than a hint of such mythical heroic qualities in Savukshaw, and the tall tales told about him.

Interpretation is problematised here via the response of the listeners. There seems to be a moral message lurking somewhere behind the veneer of success, but different listeners construe this message in different ways. On one level the story of Savukshaw is used to emphasise the dictum that practice makes perfect for aspiring cricketers. Yet Jehangir, also correctly, interprets Savukshaw’s restless activity as showing that ‘success does not always bring happiness’ (*TFB*, 153). Moreover, I would argue that this doubleness also plays a structural role for the narrative. Savukshaw is a fantastical Parsi hero for these young members of a marginal community to look up to and identify

with. Yet his story is also being used by Nariman as a balance for the subsequent story of Sarosh-Sid's experience of isolation and failure. The implied message on one level for the young listeners is that you can achieve anything you aspire to if you try: after all, Vera and Dolly have emigrated successfully to Canada and are happily married, so the experience need not necessarily be completely traumatic. This then sweetens the medicine of the more salutary story of Sarosh-Sid, told for the benefit of the older listeners who might be thinking of emigrating themselves one day.

Sarosh-Sid has emigrated to Canada, but promises to return to India if, after exactly ten years, he has not become completely Canadian. Ten years later he feels entirely westernised, except that he is unable to use western toilets and must still squat, Indian-style, perched on the toilet rim, to achieve relief. With the distress this causes him, it could be said that, in terms of morale, he suffers the same fate as the cricket ball Savukshaw smashes for four runs. He finds himself, '*Past the boundary line ... lying near the fence. Rent asunder. Into two perfect leather hemispheres. All the stitches had ripped and some of the insides had spilled out*' (TFB, 149) [emphasis added]. The fact that Sarosh-Sid's toilet technique is different from that preferred in his new host country is explicitly linked to xenophobia and racism:

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 one outside could receive the fetor of Sarosh's business wafting through the door, poor unhappy Sarosh could detect something malodorous in the air: the presence of xenophobia and hostility. (TFB, 156)

The use of defecation difficulties as a metaphor for the failure of cultural assimilation is typical of Mistry's writing, where the body often becomes a site for the exploration of social

issues and anxieties. The problems attendant on migration are narrated by Nariman in a semi-fantastical and satirical way. In an attempt to cure himself of the cultural constipation which has cost him his job, Sarosh-Sid visits a pair of advisers specialising in treating a range of digestive problems among immigrant communities, all of which correspond allegorically to the very real obstacles newcomers to the West might face: one man has not been able to stomach Wonder Bread, but has recently successfully eaten his first slice, although 'the ultimate goal', which is 'pure white Wonder Bread', still seems a long way off. Indeed, in the unlikely stories told by the immigrant specialists he meets, Dr No-Ilaaz and Mrs Maha-Lepate – the latter's name roughly translates as Big Yarn Spinner – the overall narrative spirals further and further away from a grounding in reality. Essentially, their stories of immigrant problems are framed *inside* Sid's story of his experiences as supposedly told to Nariman, which is, in turn, *inside* Nariman's recounting of the affair to his young audience, *inside* the collection of tales which – we discover at the end of 'Swimming Lessons' – is being read by the author, Kersi's parents, which is, finally, *inside* the volume we are reading, entitled *Tales from Firozsha Baag*. This *mise en abîme* structure is reminiscent of the Persian *dastan* storytelling tradition. Although the word has now come to mean a short story in general, it was originally applied to the narratives forming independent story-units within a larger narrative whole; the stories of the heroes in the *Shah-Namah* constitute one example. The *dastan* is a feature of Persian, Arabic and South Asian literary traditions. Perhaps the most famous example of the *dastan* form is the *Book of a Thousand and One Nights*.<sup>19</sup> Of course, Nariman's cautionary tale is not meant to be taken literally, but these stories-within-stories take us back through so many layers of 'reality', each more far-fetched than the last, that we begin to question the veracity of anything in the tale. Just as Derrida, writing of the *mise en abîme* structure included in Plato's *Timaeus*, where the story of the origin of Athens is repeated and passed from one teller to the next, asks whether we can work back through the layers of

speech to arrive at any base in the 'real', so, too, we may question whether we, as readers, ever pass from simulation to a source reality in Nariman Hansotia's imaginative allegories of migration. (After all, we have heard hints about the 'true' story of Sarosh-Sid in 'Condolence Visit', which is a more prosaic one involving marriage, divorce and repatriation.) Derrida says, 'In truth, each narrative content – fabulous, fictive, legendary or mythic ... – becomes in its turn the content of a different tale. Each tale is thus a *receptacle* of another. There is nothing but receptacles of narrative receptacles, or narrative receptacles of receptacles.'<sup>20</sup> In 'Squatter', then, it is not simply a case of a frame narrative as some critics have claimed, but of narrative frames.

Sarosh-Sid finally achieves his desired evacuation, ironically when he himself is about to 'evacuate' from Canada. He manages to use the toilet in the plane that is about to take off bringing him back to India. It is significant that this character, whose very name – hyphenated and culturally ambivalent – indicates his status as, in Homi Bhabha's words 'not quite/not white',<sup>21</sup> can only succeed in the in-between space of the plane. And he returns to a Bombay that is altered and unfamiliar, even down to the labels on coke bottles. There is no way to recover the old life now. The text says, 'The old pattern was never found by Sarosh; he searched in vain. Patterns of life are selfish and unforgiving' (*TFB*, 167). The storyteller is, of course, interested in just such patterns. The warning moral of this story is supposedly offered by Sarosh himself. He chooses to paraphrase *Othello*, another black outsider undone by an alien host culture, in a move which reconciles oral and written traditions:

When you shall these unlucky deeds relate, speak of me as I am; nothing extenuate, nor set down aught in malice: tell them that in Toronto once there lived a Parsi boy as best he could. Set you down this, and say, besides, that for some it was good, and for some it was bad, but for me life in the land of milk and honey was just a pain in the posterior. (*TFB*, 168)

'Squatter' is inherently a dialogic story in Bakhtin's terms. It burlesques the monologic tone of the epic in the Savukshaw

story. Yet it also maintains a dialogic engagement with its target audience. As a 'master of voices' and a good storyteller, Nariman is always aware of the response his utterances seek, and of the different levels on which his crazy stories may be received: the older boys will recognise the 'hidden' message, the literary allusions, and possibly the parody of the *Shah-Namah* heroes, while the younger ones will enjoy Savukshaw's feats of derring-do, or the scatological humour of Sarosh-Sid's toils on the toilet. His story also mixes 'high' and 'low' language forms in the citation of *Othello*. He reveals himself to be a sophisticated weaver of subtle speech acts. Words are never single or free-standing for him. They are always part of an intersubjective process of communication. He gives what Bakhtin calls a 'socially significant verbal performance [which] has the ability ... to infect with its own intention certain aspects of language ... imposing on them specific semantic nuances and specific axiological overtones'.<sup>22</sup> For Mistry the writer, as for Nariman the speaker, 'The comic style demands of the author a lively to-and-fro movement in his relation to language, it demands a continual shifting of distance between author and language, so that first some, then other aspects of language are thrown into relief.'<sup>23</sup> Nariman, and perhaps Mistry, can be read as a modern incarnation of the professional minstrel or *gosan*, of ancient Iran who, according to Boyce, quoted by Yarshater, was 'present at the graveside and at the feast, eulogist, satirist, storyteller, musician, recorder of the past achievements and commentator of his own times'.<sup>24</sup>

### Exile and Escape: 'Lend Me Your Light', 'Exercisers' and 'Swimming Lessons'

For all its playfulness, Squatter's account of the psychological (and physical) effects of migrancy makes a salutary introduction to the final triptych of stories with their themes of attempted escape and the persistence of old ties. The first of these, 'Lend Me Your Light', in a sense offers a 'real-life' equivalent for

those allegorised experiences of Sarosh-Sid. Once again, themes of connection and disconnection between past and present, and past and present selves, along with storytelling and types of journey, are explored. The more sophisticated narrative voice of the first person narrator, Kersi – older and more conscious of the pitfalls of literary convention – takes us back over the events of his adolescence and migration to Canada. As narrator, Kersi shares Nariman's love of words and consciousness of their power: he looks back in shame on his complacent boyhood use of the term '*ghati*' for Indian menials, and the arrogance it expressed. This sense of superiority is taken to extremes by Jamshed, a friend of his brother Percy, whom Kersi initially admires. Jamshed's family live in a luxury tenth-floor apartment block with a lift. His lunch is brought to school in a 'chauffeur-driven', 'air-conditioned', 'leather-upholstered' car, and he devours it in what Kersi describes as 'this collection of hyphenated lavishness' (*TFB*, 174). However, as a young Parsi susceptible to the lure of the West and destined to emigrate a year after his privileged compatriot, Kersi, too, might be said to be one of those 'hyphenated subjectivities' of the new 'border' Indian diasporas, described by Vijay Mishra, who keep in touch with the old country through family ties, and make occasional return visits.<sup>25</sup>

Jamshed cannot wait to leave India, a country he views disdainfully as mired in dirt, poverty and corruption and, thus, a lost cause. Later, when they are both ensconced in North America, Jamshed sends Kersi a letter describing the incommensurable horrors of a recent two-week visit he has made to Bombay. Kersi, whose attitude to his homeland is altogether more ambivalent, struggles to understand Jamshed's hostility, wondering whether his old friend is seeking to evade something in himself through his disproportionate response. Yet he finds himself in a sense responding in kind, as he attempts to lay claim to a continuity of identity by accentuating his 'Indianness'. In his reply he pretends that he frequents Toronto's 'Little India', although he has been there only once, and mentions his membership of the Zoroastrian Society of Ontario and appearance at

Parsi New Year celebrations, attended by a certain class of expatriots who swap stories of Indian incompetence and display exaggerated attitudes and prejudices tantamount to a performance:

As the evening progressed it took on, at an alarming rate, the semblance of a wedding party at Bombay's Cama Garden ... [but] It was Cama Garden refurbished and modernized, Cama Garden without the cluster of beggars waiting by the entrance gate for the feast to end so they could come in and claim the dustbins. (*TFB*, 182)

They patronise these sanitised simulacra of the India they have left, 'equipped with a supply of ohs and aahs for ejaculation at suitable moments, pretending to discover what they had always lived with' (*TFB*, 182). These exiles play a part. They take on a set of attitudes to the old land that, it is suggested, is an inevitable part of the psychology of migration. Despite the geographical distance, which the younger Kersi hopes will vouchsafe him greater clarity of vision, he too finds himself preparing for a visit home by choosing as presents luxury items unavailable in India; the older narrating Kersi wonders what he was hoping to barter them for: 'Attention? Gratitude?' (*TFB*, 186). (Kersi's position is similar to that of Dr Manny Patel in Bharati Mukherjee's short story, 'Nostalgia', who, despite a successful medical career in New York surrounded by the paraphernalia of western commodity fetishism, 'knew he would forever shuttle between the old world and the new',<sup>26</sup> and who becomes involved in a disastrous one-night stand with a woman who comes to symbolise the Indian life choices he has tried to repress.)

Meanwhile, Percy has decided to remain in India and set up a charitable body to help rural communities escape the grip of usurers. He now runs this with a friend, Navjeet, and expresses his contempt for Jamshed's ostentation and crass materialism. While, to use the central image borrowed from Tagore's 'song offerings', *Gitanjali*, Kersi is hiding his light amidst the dazzling glare of metropolitan brightness, and the 'light' of Jamshed's human sympathy appears to have been extinguished altogether,



Percy seems to be obeying the Zoroastrian call to charitable works, thereby exemplifying the faith's conjunction of light with the Good.<sup>27</sup> To Kersi, Percy's seems the engaged, 'authentic' life choice. He is doing 'real work', while Kersi watches sitcoms on a rented television. However, his visit home coincides with Percy's return from the village in which he has been working, with the shocking news that Navjeet has been murdered by hostile moneylenders. Jamshed's cynicism appears momentarily vindicated: is Percy's idealism any less delusory in a context where violence and brutality are endemic in the feudal power structures of rural India? (In this plotline, 'Lend Me Your Light' comes closer to one of the main themes of *A Fine Balance* than any of the other tales.) Kersi asks, 'In all of this, was there a lesson for me? To trim my expectations and reactions to things, trim them down to the proper proportions?' (*TFB*, 187). Kersi recognises that he is only another tourist in India now, purchasing the specially produced merchandise of the 'Cottage Industries store' to take home: an inauthentic, simulated version of rural culture, to contrast with the brutal reality his brother has experienced at first hand.

The self-consciousness in this retrospective narrative is indicated by its rejection of modernist narrative's quasi-resolutions. At the end, Kersi finds his questions are still unanswered and recognises that the old narrative consolations are illusory too: 'The epiphany would have to wait for another time, another trip' (*TFB*, 192). This issue, of vision and/as revelation, is buttressed by the use of motifs from, and references to, T. S. Eliot's poem of modernist fragmentation, *The Waste Land*. Kersi observes the 'parched land' of India from the plane on his return: walking disconsolately around his old stamping grounds he is caught up in 'the crowds which were now flowing down Flora Fountain' (*TFB*, 189) – recalling Eliot's crowd which flowed over London Bridge, undone by the metaphorical death of repetition in the 'Burial of the Dead' – and which include 'typists and clerks', like the pair who endure a loveless coupling in 'The Fire Sermon'; while his unexpected meeting with Jamshed, who has turned up in Bombay again,

despite his expressions of loathing for it, echoes the poet persona's encounter with the corpse-planting and apparently immortal Stetson from the ships at Mylae.<sup>28</sup> The multiple resonances set forth by these resemblances reach a peak when Kersi, on the eve of his departure, develops conjunctivitis and compares himself to the unifying presence in *The Waste Land*: 'guilty of the sin of hubris for attempting emigration out of the land of my birth and paying the price in burnt-out eyes. I, Tiresias, blind and throbbing between two lives, the one in Bombay and the one to come in Toronto ...' (*TFB*, 180)

Echoes of 'The Waste Land' are also to be found in 'Exercisers', which, moreover, features a deliberate 'false epiphany' constructed by the artful narrative lacunae. In this story, Jehangir Bulsara is now nineteen and at university. The tale is an account of his first relationship with a woman, and the frustrations caused by the interference of his disapproving and over-protective mother. It is structured around two key incidents both of which remain only partially narrated and open to interpretation: the message of Bhagwan Baba, a guru in whom his parents habitually place their trust for healing, benediction and advice; and the moment when the opportunity for Jehangir to consummate his relationship with Behroze arises. Other incidents fan out from these two key moments, in the customary weave of the present time and memory.

In an attempt to persuade Jehangir of the error of his infatuation, his father and mother take him to see the oracular Bhagwan. Lamenting the scepticism which appears to have descended on Jehangir along with his new innamorata, they urge him to 'believe again as you once believed when you were younger' (*TFB*, 208). Indeed, this story charts the shift in the old relationships that often takes place in adolescence. The past is always a more comfortable place, and Jehangir feels himself torn between the pull of the old certainties and the excitement of new love. Yet, this battle is not merely between past and present, or girlfriend and mother. In Jehangir's unconscious and almost obsessive return to the children's playground in Hanging Gardens, where he watches the late-night exercisers working out, the

homoeroticism that was a feature of this character's ambivalent nascent sexuality in 'The Collectors' is once more foregrounded. Although he likes to think of this watching as a transient phase that is now over, he automatically returns to it at times of crisis, finding comfort in the precise drill of well-toned male bodies, and indulging his fantasy of joining them in back-slapping camaraderie and exertion which always culminates in the sexually loaded image of sharing a kebab and juice. Such fantasies are, of course, covert. Yet, it seems that sexuality in general is subject to a more widespread interdiction: just as the heterosexual courting couples who come to the Gardens after dark are disturbed by boisterous voyeurs and a night-watchman, the privacy required for sexual experimentation of any kind seems unavailable in this populous yet carefully regulated world. In this context, exercising comes to take on an additional resonance, as Jehangir struggles to 'exercise' control over his own destiny.

The fulcrum of this repressive attention is Mrs Bulsara, who decides that her son is old enough to go out alone in the evenings providing he returns by eight o'clock, and who embarrasses him by wearing the traditional *mathoobanoo* head scarf when she is first introduced to Behroze. Her objection to the girl is ostensibly based on her greater wealth – in a foreshadow of *Family Matters*, the straitened Bulsaras keep envelopes of carefully saved money for essential items – but this is, in fact, just one of a series of reasons she rehearses for refusing to relinquish her hold over her son. As Behroze observes, the apron string by which Jehangir is tied is far more visible than the *kusti* cord he wears as a mark of his Zoroastrianism. Their relationship is an extreme example of what Luhrmann calls the 'double-bind' of the Parsi mother-son relationship, where the mother's attentions are perceived as powerful and stultifying: "The explicit verbal statement to the son ... is "succeed". But ... the underlying message is "don't succeed, you can't".'<sup>29</sup>

This is part of the narrative's concern with traps and entrapment. Bhagwan Baba speaks of life being full of traps, and Jehangir wonders how to interpret this typically enigmatic piece

of intelligence. Is Behroze trying to trap him? Or is he subject to the altogether more refractory operations of Fate, or *Karma*? Yet, the one interpretation Jehangir does not venture is that the trap is always already sprung, that it exists in the maternal over-protection which has become part of his very psyche: why else does he desert Behroze at their most intimate moment to obey the arbitrary curfew his mother has imposed? The theme of entrapment is most memorably captured in the image of the hedges cut into the shapes of animals and birds in Kamala Nehru Park, which Jehangir sees at twilight. They are beautiful but, significantly, petrified – ‘possessing neither the randomness of nature nor the manicured discipline imposed by man’ (*TFB*, 216) – and all frozen at points of movement, points of becoming: ‘the birds on the verge of flight, the camel and elephant and giraffe about to lumber off into the darkness. But all of them ultimately frozen. Trapped, like Bhagwan Baba said’ (*TFB*, 220).

Meteorological phenomena quite literally add atmosphere to the tale. Events take place in the oppressive heat that pre-figures the monsoon season. The visit to the guru is conducted under a ‘sombre, rainless cloud cover’ (*TFB*, 211) recalling the aridity and anticipation of the ‘What the Thunder Said’ section of *The Waste Land*, and is followed by a gust of wind which bears the unfulfilled promise of rain to relieve the drought. On the night when Jehangir makes his fateful tryst with Behroze at her empty home, a storm brews, promising freshness and relief. As readers, we are left anticipating a consummation of their relationship when the couple draw closer, only to be tantalised by a fresh ellipsis, after which we see Jehangir racing homeward through the streets in the rain. The conventions of countless romantic novels and movies suggest that the storm in such circumstances will symbolise the release of sexual climax, and that Jehangir is swept along by the exuberance of an experience that will break his mother’s spell once and for all. Instead, it soon becomes clear that he is racing home because he has missed his eight o’clock deadline and has left the shocked Behroze in mid-kiss. He arrives home, breathless and soaking, only to find the door to the flat – the only entry he truly desires – locked

against him. The false epiphany here traced is of a piece with the knowing rejection of literary resolutions shown by the narrator Kersi in 'Lend Me Your Light'. Thus, while, on the level of content, this story allows us to catch up with a character whom we have met earlier in the volume – and who is, in many respects, a parallel figure for Kersi – formally, it adds further impetus to those considerations of the craft of storytelling which have been growing throughout the volume, and which reach their culmination in the final story, 'Swimming Lessons'.

In 'Swimming Lessons', we find that Kersi has moved to Canada. The story develops through the use of what one might describe as binocular focalisation. In addition to Kersi's reflections, we are introduced, in italicised sections, to his parents' literary musings as they read the volume of short stories their son has sent them: the volume we too have been reading. Through the use of this metafictional framework,<sup>30</sup> as well as in the incidents narrated, 'Swimming Lessons' reprises and draws together several key themes visited previously, such as story-making and memory, physicality, detritus and decay, problems of clarity of vision, exile and how to turn this, and other experiences, into narrative.

In Ontario, Kersi occupies an apartment block which has certain similarities with the Firozsha Baag he has left behind, parallels which appeal to his eye for shape and order. This building too has its characters (in both senses of the word): like the Portuguese Woman, who keeps an eye on events and offers snippets of the day's stories to Kersi on his return at night; the Yugoslavian Berthe, with her uncoordinated slabs of English hurled like weapons at her feckless husband; or the wheelchair-bound old man, who reminds Kersi of his own stricken grandfather, and whose concern that Kersi guess his age is both a ritual to mark off time and a challenge thrown down to the fledgling writer. This is the apartment block as exile community, and the haphazard encounters which paper over the monadic isolation of its inhabitants can be likened to those of the international community of down-at-heel migrants who populate the boarding-house in Kensington at the beginning of Naipaul's

classic novel of exile, *The Mimic Men*.<sup>31</sup> In a sense, the immobilised old man, who seems to guard the entrance hall, becomes the Tiresias figure in this story as he observes the comings and goings of the apartment, but, as his illness takes hold, his all-seeing gaze gradually moves from the world outside to the blank wall of the lobby 'As though he is not interested in the outside world any more, having finished with all that, and now it's time to see inside' (*TFB*, 247).

An interest in narrative and symbolism is integral to this tale's wider concerns. Although Kersi's parents complain about the curt missives he sends home – they lament that 'everything about his life is locked in silence and secrecy' (*TFB*, 232) – they eventually discover that imaginative narrative can break this silence, sometimes offering 'truths' more replete and vivid than mere facts. Moreover, Kersi muses on the prevalence of water imagery in his life, as he makes his abortive first attempts to learn to swim. He remarks that, 'The universal symbol of life and regeneration did nothing but frustrate me' (*TFB*, 234) and, using hyphenated adjectives which recall Joyce, observes: 'symbols ... should be still and gentle as dewdrops, tiny, yet shining with a world of meaning. But what happens when, on the page of life itself, one encounters the ever-moving, all-engirdling sprawl of the filthy sea' (*TFB*, 234). Just as, in India, the sea is the site of the consolatory but polluting rituals of religion, symbols may make a little order in the chaos, but they are themselves intrinsically linked to the life that produces such effluvia. Kersi's reluctance to immerse himself in the swimming pool can be read as representative of his resistance to that cultural assimilation by Canada which, on another level, he desires. Experiencing casual racism in the swimming pool changing area, he goes home to reflect on his failed 'watery rebirth' (*TFB*, 240). According to Smaro Kamboureli, invoking Homi Bhabha:

The biologism of the image of being born as ethnic in the host country ... is conditioned by the essentialist and appropriating strategies practised by the host country ... The hiatus between *being* (what the ethnic subject was, and what it thinks it still is) and *becoming* (what becomes

of that subject in the host country, how it is perceived) is what structures “the spectacle of otherness”.<sup>32</sup>

Such considerations should alert us to the problematic status of language for the émigré, and the importance of perspectives, of ways of seeing. In a symbol of the first mental step necessary for a degree of assimilation, Kersi, having previously only been able to recognise the emblematic maple tree among the flora surrounding him in Canada, ends by resolving to buy a book on trees so that he can put a name to more of them. Humans are less biddable, however. Despite writing of the old man, Kersi never discovers his name. He thinks to check the designation on the mailbox only after the old man has died, and finds all identifying traces erased, there is nothing to signify his ever having existed there. He, along with the trees, remains somehow outside the realm of language, beyond the narrator’s ability to speak for him: one more example of what Beckett might have called the ‘nameless things’ and ‘thingless names’ which confront the writer in a new environment. There is, in such incidents, a paradigm of the condition of the exile groping his way to a new relationship with language, new words for a New World. More particularly, Kersi’s need to reshape in words the alien circumstances confronting him, recalls the problems of naming, of making one’s language adequate to one’s surroundings, which also confronted early European settlers to Canada.<sup>33</sup>

A sense of perspective is also essential. Kersi is disappointed to discover that the bikini-clad sunbathing women on the lawn, about whom he has been fantasising, are actually older and less attractive than they appear from a distance. However, it is suggested that this kind of remove might be valuable for a writer, when Kersi’s father, reading his son’s first volume in Bombay, predicts future success for him if he continues to write about his immigrant experiences in Canada, while preserving ‘the important distance’ (*TFB*, 248). And, finally, when Kersi plunges his head beneath the surface of his bathwater, the different perspective on things he discovers when he opens his eyes is symbolic of both the personal and cultural immersion he must

undergo, and of what Linda Hutcheon has called 'the doubleness or bifocality of the ethnic vision':<sup>34</sup>

The drain plug looks different, slightly distorted; there is a hair trapped between the hole and the plug, it waves and dances with the movement of the water. I come up, refresh my lungs, examine quickly the overwater world of the washroom, 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. (*TFB*, 249)

Anticipating *Family Matters*, issues of cause and effect are interrogated in 'Swimming Lessons'. When the building's heating breaks down, Kersi wonders: 'It's the hot water that goes through the rads and heats them. Or is it the other way round? Is there no hot water because the rads have stopped circulating it?' (*TFB*, 244). And remarking on the high incidence of divorce in the Parsi community, Kersi comments on its degree of westernisation, speculating as to whether the former is a result of the latter, or vice versa. However, whether it is possible to resolve such questions when posed in these terms, is less clear. During one of their discussions on what has motivated their son to write, Kersi's mother wonders whether he '*is remembering because he is a writer, or whether he started to write because he is unhappy and thinks of his past, and wants to save it all by making stories of it*' (*TFB*, 243). Yet neither possibility seems to offer an adequate account of the flexible and complex interaction of character, past and present as we have witnessed it in this volume.

Nevertheless, such reflections exemplify the way in which Kersi's father and mother are used as vehicles for a discussion of writing and inspiration in this story. His father explains a theory of literary creation he has come across which suggests that it takes a writer around ten years to absorb and understand experiences before he can attain the 'artistic distance' necessary to turn them into stories. His mother, however, has little time for such critical niceties, preferring to allow interpretation to emerge from the stories themselves. Ultimately, as Jehangir Bulsara might have observed, it is up to the individual reader to discover connections and form interpretations.



It is, in fact, possible to object to the violation involved in these intrusive parental meditations, in having Kersi's parents disgorge chunks of semi-digested literary theory. The two figures reading these stories at home in Bombay appear to bear little relation to the carefully drawn characters in 'Of White Hairs and Cricket', for example. The voices in the last story do not 'feel' as if they belong to the same people. A certain amount of arbitrary grafting seems to have been involved to get the discussion underway. However, the tone makes sense if one reads their sections as taking place *within* the reflexive framework: in other words, they are also fictional constructs consciously produced by the narrator for this purpose. A kind of metafictional loop is at work in this story. The parents read Kersi's stories about his youth and the move to Canada. But when they read the last story, do they read themselves? And who is writing them reading this? The fact that they are being written and read too is as important as what they themselves read. The metafictional element ensures that these figures never break free of the diegetic gravitational pull, to exist 'outside' the writing. As well as explaining the technique here, such an understanding also makes it difficult to sustain the neat distinctions between fact and fiction, memory and creation, and writing and reading posited by the father at one point. While the writer does not elbow his way into his own text in 'Swimming Lessons', we *are* witnessing a kind of metafictional commentary couched in the third person and propounded via specific characters.

Craig Tapping has offered an excellent synopsis of *Tales from Firozsha Baag's* aims and themes. He says that it is,

an exemplary postmodern, postcolonial literary collection. It stages the translation of oral cultures into literature with a commentary on the traditional society from which such practices derive; it reflects on textuality and on the growing consciousness and literary abilities of its protagonist-author, it mocks well-meaning Anglo-Saxon liberalism through satire; and it appropriates the inherited narratives of the imperial canon in parody which opens our understanding of such figural systems.<sup>35</sup>

One might add that, in its rigorous structural integrity, which yet allows for a fluid investigation of universally recognisable but specifically grounded experiences, it can also be seen as an apprenticeship for the ambitious novels that were to follow.