

Deregulating the Evacuated Body: Rohinton Mistry's "Squatter"

John Eustace

Volume 28, Number 1, Spring 2003

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/scl28_1art02

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

The University of New Brunswick

ISSN

0380-6995 (print)

1718-7850 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Eustace, J. (2003). Deregulating the Evacuated Body:: Rohinton Mistry's "Squatter". *Studies in Canadian Literature / Études en littérature canadienne*, 28(1), 26–42.

Article abstract

Images of squalor, and more particularly evacuated bodies, are pervasive in Rohinton Mistry's fiction, most notably the short story "Squatter" in *Tales from Firozsha Baag*. However, such images do not debase Mistry's characters in a racialized discourse but elevate them, acknowledging their basic humanity to challenge such discourses that would overdetermine and further disenfranchise them. If Mistry's fiction is full of shit, that shit is fertilizer, nurturing a fundamental respect for humanity and its persistence even in the most dire of circumstances.

Deregulating the Evacuated Body: Rohinton Mistry's "Squatter"

JOHN EUSTACE

These squatting figures — to the visitor, after a time, as eternal and emblematic as Rodin's Thinker — are never spoken of; they are never written about; they are not mentioned in novels or stories; they do not appear in feature films or documentaries. This might be regarded as part of a permissible prettifying intention. But the truth is that *Indians do not see these squatters* and might even, with complete sincerity, deny that they exist: a collective blindness arising out of the Indian fear of pollution and the resulting conviction that Indians are the cleanest people in the world.

— V.S. Naipaul, *An Area of Darkness*

In attempting to expose bodies already too exposed, *An Area of Darkness* is forced to contemplate its own extraneousness as a narrative, and its secret arrival at an image of race as the evacuated body.

— Sara Suleri, *The Rhetoric of English India*

ROHINTON MISTRY'S FICTION is full of shit. Throughout the *Tales from Firozsha Baag* (1987), along the compound wall surrounding the Noble family's apartment block in *Such a Long Journey* (1991), along the railway tracks of the unnamed city in *A Fine Balance* (1995), and into the bedpan of Nariman Vakeel in *Family Matters* (2002), bodies seem to be evacuating with unusual regularity. These representations of what, according to Naipaul, "is never spoken of" and "never written about" (76) might explain, in part, the reactions of some of Mistry's reviewers and critics. Arun Mukherjee, in her review of *Such a Long Journey*, suggests that many of its Western reviewers read the preponderance of bodily excrescences in condescending and self-serving ways, reinforcing "their smug sense of Canadian (Western?) superiority" (86). However, Parsis and Indian nationals to whom I have spoken personally have re-

acted similarly to the portrayals of squalor, suggesting that such representations do not serve their communities. One of the most public condemnations of Mistry came from a Western intellectual, Germaine Greer, who faulted him for his depictions of Indian squalor and cruelty in *A Fine Balance*: “I just don’t recognize this dismal, dreary city. It’s a Canadian book about India. What could be worse? What could be more terrible?” (“Mistry calls”; qtd in Ross 240).¹ This comment prompted an unusual rejoinder from Mistry, who publically defended the verisimilitude of his representations, and then wrote the incident into the plot of *Family Matters*.²

In this paper, I will join the discussion concerning the efficacy of Mistry’s representations of squalor by focussing on his deployment of the trope of the squatting Indian in his short story “Squatter.” In focussing on this trope, I will address indirectly the complaints of Greer and others: while their complaints are not specifically about the representations of shit and shitting or about Mistry’s deployment of the problematic trope, public manifestations of these private affairs in his fiction epitomize the sordid depictions against which his critics rail. I propose an alternative reading of Mistry’s excrescent representations, one that goes demonstrably against the grain of contemporary readings of shit and evacuation in the postcolonial context to give them a positive political valency. And “Squatter” seems the most appropriate vehicle for this alternative reading because it is his most direct engagement with a squalid subject. As such, it suggests how we might look at the squalor represented in his literary corpus as a whole.

To demonstrate how Mistry’s short story renegotiates the political purchase of shit and evacuation, this paper will first situate the trope of the squatter within a postcolonial context. V.S. Naipaul’s deployment of it in his travel memoir *An Area of Darkness* (1964) seems representative of its postcolonial purview. Naipaul’s experiences of ubiquitous squatters — “the starved child defecating at the roadside while the mangy dog waited to eat the excrement” (49), the three women “companionably defecating” on a hill in Srinagar (75), the traveller passing the time by defecating in the gutter at a bus station in Madras (75) — lead him to this conclusion: “Indians defecate everywhere. They defecate, mostly, beside the railway tracks. But they also defecate on the beaches; they defecate on the hills; they defecate on the river banks; they defecate on the streets; they never look for cover” (76). Despite his cultural origins — or as Sara Suleri suggests, perhaps, because of them (163-64) — Naipaul’s deployment of the

trope is typical of imperial narratives. His squatting Indians are degenerate racial bodies; they are squatting, gaping anuses enacting their own negation. The body, in evacuating, is emptied of individual signification for the observer, who is repulsed and/or threatened by the uncontained nature of this behaviour. It is then resignified in a discursive system as an other body, allowing the observer to contain the threat it represents in a rhetorical cordon sanitaire that emulates the imperial boundaries established between rulers and subject peoples. Naipaul's language, in particular his parody of Churchill's famed pep talk to a beleaguered British Empire on 4 June 1940 — "we shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender" — connects this representation of the racialized evacuating body directly to threats against the territorial sanctity of imperial space.

Naipaul's graphic representations of squatters signal a problem faced by postcolonial writers who represent excrement and evacuation: such representations are necessarily charged by a pervasive colonial rhetoric of debasement. In *The Rhetoric of Empire*, David Spurr suggests that debasement tropes — figures that degrade colonized subjects by characterizing them as filthy, defiled bodies to produce an abject other — are crucial to the imperial project on both territorial and psychological levels. Empires deploy such tropes "both as a justification for European intervention and as the necessary iteration of a fundamental difference between colonizer and colonized" (78).

Warwick Anderson's article on American imperialism in the Philippines, "Excremental Colonialism: Public Health and the Poetics of Pollution," explains the process in terms fitting to this study. He discerns the colonial discourse producing the abject other and consolidating imperial territory in two discursive mechanisms: medical texts and toilets. According to Anderson, both played prominent roles in the consolidation of American control over the Philippines. The medical texts, contrasting "a closed, ascetic American body with an open, grotesque Filipino body, the former typically in charge of a sterilized laboratory or clinic, the latter squatting in an unruly, promiscuous marketplace," call for "ceaseless disinfection" and "medical reformation" of the Filipino body to protect vulnerable American colonists (640-41). The toilet — both the instrument itself and its enclosure — was the principal means of containing the nightmarish threat of squatting Filipinos. What we have here is a discursive system by which Filipino bodies are evacuated of individual signification and resignified as uncontained and contaminating colonial others, squat-

ters on territory that demands regulation, hence imperial intervention. Texts and toilets work in concert, the former licensing through debasement, the latter enacting the regulation of Filipino space while simultaneously creating the conditions for the subject's admission of abjection. A corpus of medical texts evolves informed by discourses of progress and modernity to support American regulation of Filipino space and body, enshrining *American Standards* in this other space. The toilet answers the colonist's demand for a cordon sanitaire between clean American bodies and filthy Filipino ones. It is a system of enclosure, of capture, of physical and moral imprisonment. It is also a confessional of sorts, and the act of evacuation a confession of filthiness and impurity: "In submitting to the Americans' craze for building toilets," says Anderson, "Filipinos voiced their own impurity. Untreated, their excrement could have no regenerating power in the fields; rather, it had become a source of shame to be admitted, then sealed off and enclosed" (661).³

Read in this light, debasement tropes deployed by postcolonial writers, even in the service of their own resistant agendas, necessarily iterate colonial abjection. Joshua Esty's article "Excremental Postcolonialism" reveals this quandary while trying to recuperate scatological representations through readings of postcolonial texts that might be considered more progressive than Naipaul's in their political agendas. Esty shows how Wole Soyinka's *The Interpreters* (1965) and Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (1968) appropriate debasement tropes, "turning scatology to the new task of representing postcolonial disillusionment" (30) by symbolically associating their new governments with unregenerative excrement. In this interpretive framework, however, representations of shit and shitting in the postcolony remain degrading and are therefore problematic vehicles of resistance for postcolonial writers: Soyinka and Armah reinscribe the negative valency of shit through their representations, buttressing colonial discourses that played on that charge to justify the regulation of other bodies and other territories.

On the surface, at least, it seems that Mistry's "Squatter" is caught in the same quandary. Within a framing narrative, the baag storyteller, Nariman Hansotia, tells the local boys two stories, one about Savukshaw the great cricketer, one about a Parsi immigrant to Canada, Sarosh the "squatter." The latter is most important to my reading at this point, though the two stories work in tandem to make statements about squatting. Sarosh promises his mother and himself that he will fully adapt to Canadian life within ten years or return to Bombay. He succeeds in his adaptation in every way except one: he finds it impossible to void him-

self in “the Canadian way” — sitting instead of squatting. As a result he returns to Bombay. Sarosh’s failure to renegotiate his identity in Canada is overtly linked to discourses that regulate Indian bodies and Indian space: he essentializes his own racial identity and internalizes dominant Euro-American discourses on normality, progress, and modernity, all of which prevent him from claiming a place in Canada.

Appropriately, the story begins with Sarosh in a compromised position. The boys discover him “depressed and miserable, perched on top of the toilet, crouching on his haunches, feet planted firmly for balance upon the white plastic oval of the toilet seat.” He suffers this position, having “no choice but to climb up and simulate the squat of . . . Indian latrines,” because “no amount of exertion [while sitting] could produce success” (153). Sarosh is a patent figure of transcultural anxiety. His posture does not fit with the space he occupies, and as the language of the passage suggests, his inability to make it fit is emotionally debilitating. As far as he is concerned, he cannot shit correctly, even in his own apartment.

Sarosh’s inability to fit into his adopted space produces even more anxiety when he has to use public toilets. There the links to the imperial discourses underwriting his sense of displacement and imprisoning him in an abject racialized body begin to reveal themselves: “In his own apartment Sarosh squatted barefoot. Elsewhere, if he had to go with his shoes on, he would carefully cover the seat with toilet paper before climbing up. He learnt to do this after the first time, when his shoes had left telltale footprints on the seat. He had had to clean it with a wet paper towel. Luckily, no one had seen him” (155-56). The footprints Sarosh leaves on the toilet seat are reminiscent of the footprint on Crusoe’s beach: signifiers of otherness that carry with them the colonial burden of savagery, in this case connected to evacuation practices instead of cannibalism. They are read, at least in Sarosh’s mind, as signs that he does not belong in this Canadian space. Like Anderson’s abject Filipinos, he imprints his own impurity on the seat every time he squats on the sit-down toilet. His attempt to wash away the footprints signifying that impurity exposes the anxiety he feels, and ultimately the sort of cultural erasure he sees himself having to embrace if he is to adapt successfully to this new territory.⁴

Of course, as the subsequent passage reveals, even when Sarosh learns to avoid leaving telltale footprints on the toilet seat, he is overdetermined by signs of otherness that promiscuously breach the privacy of the toilet stall:

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

For Sarosh, the toilet stall is an interpretable space that can be surveyed and surveilled through sights, sounds, and smells. The signs gathered by the senses are interpreted according to a set of well known conventions or regulations to distinguish between the foreign and domestic, the impure and pure. And Sarosh sees himself signified as racial other by the interpretive conventions applied to this space. The signs identify him as a squatter, invoking the racialized trope of the squatting Indian in need of regulation. Most importantly in the context of his attempt to successfully adapt to this new nation, they identify him as a squatter on Canadian territory, challenging his entitlement to occupy this well regulated space.

Through Sarosh's dilemma as it is represented in the passages above, "Squatter"'s central metaphor does seem a debasement trope, its representations of evacuation consistent with other postcolonial representations of the same. However, as the remainder of this paper will suggest, the story recuperates this trope and problematizes the essentializing notions of identity encoded by its deployment in neocolonial contexts. It effects this recuperation in two complementary ways: first, by revealing the discursive contingency of identity, unveiling the ideological apparatuses by which identity is produced and regulated; and second, by situating those regulating discourses or signifying systems next to and within a carnivalesque narrative to register the ambivalence of the trope and to reinvest it with regenerative potential.

The regulatory nature of Nariman's stories themselves is fairly transparent, as my preliminary reading of Sarosh's dilemma suggests. Nariman, as storyteller and thus "repository of the community ethos" (Malak 110), gathers the boys in the baag around him and relates tales that address Parsi anxieties about displacement and desires for emplacement. The stories Nariman tells, then, impart cultural regulations and act as vehicles of cultural containment, as illustrated by the fact that when the stories begin, the baag watchman, who has the equally important duty of keeping riff-raff out

and keeping the boys in, can take a break from his surveillance duties (148). Both stories operate within several discursive modalities to effect this regulation.

Nariman's story of the greatest Indian cricketer, Savukshaw,⁵ who was only prevented from single-handedly defeating a famous British team when interrupted by rain, operates within national and cultural discourses to emplace Parsi pride and underscore the centrality of Parsi values to the nation. The national discourse manifests itself through an oppositional framework that sets India up against Britain in a cricket match, symbolically reenacting the national struggle for independence and legitimizing India's desire to be seen as an equal to its former master. The cultural discourse on success is specifically Parsi, traceable to pre-independent India, where the thoroughly Westernized group experienced a disproportionate measure of success and power under the Raj. Obviously, the discourse legitimizing the pursuit and determining the compass of success is not restrictive to Parsis in India. However, in the context of this story it is made to seem so: this discourse is invoked to legitimize the place of Parsis within the national framework. The story of Savukshaw not only affirms national identity, but hinges its success on Parsi intervention. The hero intervenes on behalf of an Indian cricket team on tour in England when their star batsman contracts influenza — an inversion of the colonial trope in which the Englishman contracts an illness in the colony. This sick national body is replaced by a healthy Parsi body. Through his example, Savukshaw signifies how the marginalized Parsis could ensure India's success were they to resume their central place on the national scheme/team.

Sarosh's story operates within a comparable set of discourses, though with the distinctive goal of harnessing Parsi fears of displacement to regulate emigration. When he follows a threatening demographic trend, seeking happiness or emplacement "in the land of milk and honey" (168) instead of within the community of Bombay, Sarosh enacts what Nilufer Bharucha characterizes as the double displacement of the Parsi diaspora (57): as a Parsi, he is a squatter on Indian territory, and he is identified — or, at least, he identifies himself — as an Indian squatter on Canadian territory. Several discourses combine to overdetermine his identity and to further his sense of displacement. His emigration is determined by the cultural discourse concerning success we saw in Savukshaw's story. And in light of Savukshaw's story, we must again read its deployment as culturally restrictive. Sarosh seems unable to achieve the ideal of Parsi success within an independent India because he is caught in a historical and national discourse that signifies him as comprador

and cultural other. And in Canada he is caught within an inherited colonial discourse that overwrites multicultural policy to elide cultural specificity, signifying him as racial other and lumping him “together with other Asian groups — specifically Indians” (Bharucha 58). Finally, when he returns in defeat to Bombay and to the comfort of the local, he finds himself in an even greater state of displacement, written out of the discursive space of the Parsi community whose “patterns” have changed in his absence, leaving him “alone” “forlorn,” and “woebegone” (*Tales* 167). Through his example, Sarosh thus signifies the dangers of emigration and the importance of knowing one’s place.

The overt regulatory imperatives of both stories are problematized by the framing narrative containing them. As Ajay Heble persuasively argues, “Nariman’s own patterns of behaviour implicitly work to undermine the impact of his stor[ies]” (53). I would retool Heble’s argument on the poetics of cultural hybridity in “Squatter,” arguing that Nariman’s narrative practice problematizes the regulatory imperatives encoded by his stories. It does so through reflexivity: first, by operating within a set of complex and often conflicting discourses to make the process of cultural regulation transparent; and second, by liberating auditors/readers from such regulations to call attention to the discursive contingency of their own cultural identities.

Again, Heble provides a useful way of reading Nariman’s narrative practice. “Rather than simply proceeding on the basis of an opposition between the new world (as a source of alienation) and the old world (as the only authentic source of values),” says Heble, “Mistry interrogates the relationship between diverse cultural groups and dismantles traditional structures of authority which privilege an essential cultural purity” (53). This interrogation begins with the very ritual by which Nariman indicates that he is ready to tell his stories: while polishing “the apple of his eye,” a 1932 Mercedes Benz (145), he whistles Western show tunes: “Rose Marie,” a song popularized by Slim Whitman from a Hollywood film (1954)⁶ and operetta (1924) by the same name; then “Colonel Bogie March” from *Bridge on the River Kwai* (1957). These show tunes and the Mercedes — which Heble rightly sees as signs “that post-colonial identity is always already a hybridized formation” (53) — undermine the regulatory imperatives of Nariman’s Parsi stories by situating them beside other cultural narratives that operate within similar discursive modalities to effect similar regulatory imperatives.

An expanded reading of these filmic allusions should make this process clear. *Rose Marie*, a musical romance set in Quebec but filmed in the

Rockies, tells of how a dutiful Mountie falls in love with a French-Canadian girl while pursuing her love interest, a trapper suspected of murder. The Mountie, like the cricketer Savukshaw, is an idealized hero, who, in bringing order to the chaotic space of the Canadian wilderness — especially the culturally indistinct “Indians” in that wilderness — encodes and legitimizes white presence in Canadian space. Order in this space hinges on a white presence. Clearly, though the power dynamics informing the two stories are very different, the indigenizing discourse⁷ operating through this film resembles the discourse of emplacement in Savukshaw’s story. And the colonial discourse eliding the cultural specificities of indigenous people in Canada is reminiscent of that operating in Sarosh’s story. *Rose Marie* deploys these similar discourses in the service of its own regulatory imperative: authority — specifically, white authority — is necessary to ensure order in this wild place. *Bridge on the River Kwai* tells of a British colonel in a Japanese POW camp who becomes so obsessed with building a bridge across the River Kwai to prove the superiority of British culture and efficiency that he loses sight of what his success might mean to the war effort. The colonel’s actual imprisonment mirrors Sarosh’s discursive imprisonment. Both men operate within cultural discourses of success: one Parsi, one British. And both, though from different perspectives, operate within disabling orientalist discourses on race that prevent them from overcoming a sense of displacement to negotiate effective identities in new contexts: the colonel’s assumptions about the inferiority of the Japanese and the superiority of the British — stirred by his sense of displacement from the centre of power and a concomitant need to reassert his natural right to control the colonized space — blind him to his duty to block the bridge’s construction; Sarosh’s internalization of racist discourses prevents him from overcoming his sense of double displacement in Canada. The regulatory imperative of *Bridge*, reminiscent of that in Sarosh’s narrative, concerns the importance of knowing one’s place. These two films — combined with the Mercedes, which operates within both Western and Parsi discourses of success — undermine the regulatory imperatives of Nariman’s stories by showing how similar discourses can be deployed in different cultural contexts for similar regulatory purposes.

The mixed signals encoded by Nariman’s narrative practice carry over to the allusive stories themselves. Savukshaw’s story alludes to Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* — in the fielder who is “a veritable Brobdignagian” (148) — and Thayer’s “Casey at the Bat” — in the cricketer himself arrogantly lifting his bat, ignoring two balls that are only slightly wide of the stump.⁸ And the story of Sarosh alludes directly to Tolstoy’s *Anna*

Karenina — “unhappy families are unhappy in their own fashion” (158)⁹ — and Shakespeare’s *Othello* — “I pray you in your stories ... [w]hen 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 as 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” (168).¹⁰ Again, these allusions invoke the regulatory imperatives of other cultures, making transparent those informing Nariman’s story. Nariman inverts the imperatives of Swift and Thayer, both of which might be said to address an overweening sense of stature and place, to show in relief the true stature and rightful place of the meek Parsi, Savukshaw. And he deploys the imperatives of Tolstoy and Shakespeare, both of which again might be said to address the issue of knowing one’s place — the former within a gendered hierarchy, the latter within a racial hierarchy — to buttress the imperative against emigration in Sarosh’s story.

In the midst of all this discursive play, much of it revolving around place and belonging, Mistry situates the governing trope of the short story, the squatter. Pivotal to the process of unveiling the various discourses regulating identity, this trope invites auditors and readers to reflect critically on the imperatives circumscribing Nariman’s narrative practice and informing his stories. And the fulcrum of this reflection is the bodily lower stratum of the carnival.

The carnivalesque nature of the story — introduced by the playful nature of the title itself — is never far from sight, even when, as my reading of Sarosh’s troubles with the toilet suggests, it appears to be subsumed by colonial discourse. The audience must be willing to recognize and negotiate the ambivalence of the governing trope, however, if the carnivalesque potential of the narrative is to be realized. As the sophisticated listener, Jehangir, suggests, “ultimately ... it [is] up to the listener to decide” (148). But the listeners’ liberation from regulatory imperatives depends upon them making the right choice.

Sarosh’s enlistment of Canada’s multicultural machinery in the service of his problem exemplifies how the story invites its audience to recognize and negotiate that ambivalence. On the simplest level, the narrative invites its audience to see how the regulatory imperatives of colonial discourse intersect with the regulatory imperatives of multicultural policy. In multicultural Canada — which, as defined by a sceptical Nariman, “is supposed to ensure that ethnic cultures are able to flourish, so that Canadian society will consist of a mosaic of cultures” (160) — the kind of

cultural erasure Sarosh seeks through his radical adaptation should not be crucial to successful immigration. Nevertheless, when Sarosh seeks help from the Indian Immigrant Aid Society, a local group affiliated with the Multicultural Department, he is led down the path toward a more radical transformation with the help of the same medical discourse that installed the toilet in the colonies to regulate racialized bodies and imperial space. Dr. No-Ilaaz, an immigrant specialist, tells him of a new device, the CNI, or *Crappus Non Interruptus*, which can be surgically installed in the bowel and operated with the help of a device much like a garage door opener. Clearly, the kind of progressive medical solutions to adaptive problems Dr. No-Ilaaz prescribes will provide a quick fix to Sarosh's problem with the sit-down toilet. However, it will treat the symptoms of his cultural constipation while it actually perpetuates the disease of racial and cultural essentialism by making Sarosh a regular Canadian — even if slightly mechanical in his regularity. By the same token, the Multicultural Department that funds such a project must be recognized as an instrument of neocolonial discourse, facilitating the ultimate admission of his abjection: “he was nothing but a failure in this land — a failure not just in the washrooms of the nation but everywhere” (162).

The problem with such a reading, however, is that it totally ignores the carnivalesque humour of the incident. And the carnivalesque nature of Nariman's narrative, its humorous emphasis on the bodily lower stratum, works to deregulate and deterritorialize the colonized body. Like much carnivalesque humour, it deploys the bodily lower stratum to subvert dominant discourses — in this case, the same discourses that regulate colonial bodies and imperial space through texts and toilets. Dr. No-Ilaaz, whose name means “no remedy,” is a farcical representation of internal and internalized Western medicine, a narrative device emphasizing the bizarre nature of Western attempts to regulate colonial bodies through medical discourses. And the *Crappus Non Interruptus* is equally farcical and equally challenging to the dominant discourse. The Latinate phrasing highlights the pretense of Western medical discourse while forecasting through the variation on *coitus interruptus* that Sarosh's operation will not lead to a regenerated sense of self and place. Moreover, it highlights the inadequacy of the technological instruments used to regulate other bodies, especially given the fears that someone with a rogue garage door opener will release Sarosh's sphincter muscle, making him more regular than he might choose to be, and creating a mess in his trousers.

The story of Sarosh and the CNI is utterly ridiculous, which is in fact the point. For so are the regulatory narratives that reduce colonized

subjects to gaping anuses. Sarosh's facile acceptance of the imperialist narratives that degrade his body to regulate it, reducing him to a squatter in multicultural Canada, can be countered by the production of narratives that degrade to produce the regenerative and equalizing laughter of the carnival. The degrading bodily lower stratum humour of the carnival is subversive and equalizing; it makes transparent the mechanisms of dominance and, in Bakhtin's terms, "digs a bodily grave for a new birth" (21).

Thus, Nariman's degrading story must be understood for its regenerative potential. The story breaks the rules of decorum he himself has established over his years as storyteller, leaving the boys responsible for negotiating not only the meaning of this unprecedented story, but the meaning of his departure from narrative convention. This departure from convention, unlike Sarosh's departure from bathroom convention, is a great success: Nariman produces, according to Jehangir, "the best story he had ever told" (168). Interestingly, Nariman's successful departure from convention also gives us cause to reconsider our judgement of Sarosh's lack of success in the world of washrooms.

Clearly, there are a few ways of understanding his failure. As I suggest above, we can read it as the predictable ending to a regulatory story told by Nariman in a feeble effort to preserve Parsi culture. If he is going to convince the boys in the baag to stay in India to preserve the community, he is going to have to attend to transcultural failures. However, Nariman prefaces his narrative by admitting that Sarosh's situation is unique, calling attention to the successful immigration of two Parsi girls, Vera and Dolly (153). And the story itself suggests that Sarosh's failure lies in his own self-conception, rather than in a failure to live up to external conventions. His is a failure of interpretation. Indeed, Sarosh's compromised position at the beginning — which is actually the end — of the story, can be read as a sign of his successful transculturation thwarted by limited interpretive conventions. He is "depressed," "miserable," and "suffering" while he squats on the plastic oval of the toilet because he cannot see beyond the dominant conventions of interpretation in this space to read the signs of his success. He allows those dominant conventions to override the success of his manoeuvre, his ability to balance on an instrument that is not meant for such contortions to effect the catharsis he seeks. Yet through the vehicle of the carnivalesque narrative, which inverts dominant conventions, Nariman's listeners and Mistry's readers are invited to recognize and acknowledge the subversive and successful nature of Sarosh's balancing act.

In my focus on the carnivalesque nature of the narrative, I offer a supplement to Heble's otherwise sound reading of resistance in the story. He suggests that we read "Sarosh not in terms of alienation, discomfort and failure, but rather in terms of a *resistance* to hegemonic practices" (54). In his critical framework, Sarosh is not failing to adapt, but is resisting on some unconscious level the discourses that would contain and essentialize him. I propose another reading, building on Heble's call to read resistance in "Squatter," but locating that resistance in a different place: in the reflexive carnivalesque nature of the narrative itself. Instead of focussing on Sarosh as the locus of resistance, then, I propose a reading that focusses on the production of the reflexive carnivalesque narrative — manifest in the ambivalent trope of the squatter — as a means of deregulating the evacuated colonial body.

Indeed, the ending of the short story privileges this reading of narrative resistance. As Nariman ends this tale of the transcultural toilet, the boys clamouring for more stories of the indomitable Savukshaw, he signals his own understanding of his achievement. He agrees to tell another story of Savukshaw, but not the one they want, not the story of Savukshaw the mighty hunter: "Next time it will be Savukshaw again. Savukshaw the artist. The story of the Parsi Picasso" (169). This decision reveals Nariman's own understanding of his story's regenerative potential. His shift from the simplistic story of Savukshaw the Cricketer and Savukshaw the hunter to Savukshaw the artist shows that his tale of degradation and regeneration has created a space for new kinds of hybridized heroes, ones who will redefine cultural spaces and boundaries through the imagination.

As I suggest at the opening of this paper, Mistry's deployment of the trope of the squatter in this short story should prepare us to read the preponderance of excrement in his narratives. Obviously, not all of his representations of squalor are cast in reflexive carnivalesque moulds. Yet the philosophy behind the carnivalesque deployment of bodily lower stratum — the unifying and regenerative nature of bodily functions — does come into play in all his fiction. Mistry's fiction, coming as it does from the Parsi diaspora, is preoccupied with issues of place and homelessness. And quite often, the representations of evacuating bodies are tied to this preoccupation. From Gustad of *Such a Long Journey*, who tries to make his home healthy by stopping itinerants from using the compound wall as a latrine; to Ishvar and Omprakash, the untouchable tailors from *A Fine*

Balance, who squat by the railway tracks with the other homeless men; to Nariman Vakeel of *Family Matters*, who is shifted from his home when Parkinson's disease makes him incontinent — in all of these fictions evacuation is tied to homelessness and to the basic indignities faced by the disenfranchised.¹¹ In these contexts, shit and shitting do not debase Mistry's human subjects in a racialized discourse but elevate them, acknowledging their basic humanity to challenge discourses that would overdetermine and further disenfranchise them. If his fiction is full of shit, then, that shit is a fertilizer, nurturing a fundamental respect for humanity and its persistence even in the most dire of circumstances.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

I am indebted to Richard Cunningham, Richard Davies, Lance La Rocque, and Bob Perrins for their comments on this paper. I would like to thank Acadia's School of Research and Graduate Studies for their generous financial support of my research.

NOTES

¹ I cite both sources here because I first learned of the controversy through Ross's article and because Ross himself seemed to be quoting from a questionable internet resource. I have also verified part of the quotation in a report from the *Edmonton Journal*, "Greer Grating, Mistry Complains."

² Mistry's response was both effective and ineffective. On the one hand he questioned Greer's ability to make an assessment based on "four months teaching the daughters of high society" in Mumbai. On the other hand, he indulges in insider exclusivism, suggesting that his twenty-three years in India prior to emigrating puts him in the most appropriate position to judge India. While the latter defence does have merit, it also seems essentialist in its prescriptions about the critical license to form judgements. Fortunately, Mistry does qualify that essentialism, if only moderately, in *Family Matters*. Vilas, the friend of one of the main characters, Yezad, recalls this story in the context of a discussion about injustice in India and how human beings "say things to make themselves feel better. Or they deny the injustice" (202):

A while back, I read a novel about the Emergency. A big book, full of horrors, real as life. But also full of life, and the laughter and dignity of ordinary people. One hundred per cent honest — made me laugh and cry as I read it. But some reviewers said no, no, things were not that bad. Especially foreign critics. You know how they come here for two weeks and become experts. One poor woman whose name I can't remember made such a hash of it, she had to be a bit pagal, defending Indira, defending the Sanjay sterilization scheme, defending the entire Emergency — you felt sorry for her even though she was a big professor at some big university in England. What to do? People are afraid to accept the truth. As T.S. Eliot wrote, "Human kind cannot bear very much reality." (202-03)

³ While a comparable analysis of British deployments of the trope of the squatting

subject remains to be written, historical sources do suggest that the British manifestation of the trope operated much like the American one. As Radhika Ramasubban points out, controlling sanitation on the Indian subcontinent was an imperative of the Crown after it had assumed control from the East India Company in 1857 (38). A series of cholera outbreaks traced to India and spreading across the world, presumably through imperial trade routes, compelled the British to act. On the home front, these cholera epidemics led to the Sanitary Act of 1866, which, among other things, made local governments responsible for maintaining sewers and water supplies in England. In India — Britain's most precious colonial asset, housing a third of all British troops — territorial interests were at stake. There was therefore a practical need to "make British India liveable for the British" (Ramasubban 38), which manifested itself in the creation of a cordon sanitaire between troops and the population, and that population's "nightsoil" in particular. As Ramasubban points out, that cordon sanitaire was prescribed by the racialized pathology of cholera, which was often transmitted through fecal matter: "The perception of the 'native' population as a secondary source of infection required the sanitary machine to encompass them, particularly for an understanding and prevention of the 'more obvious causes of disease' in their midst" (42). Given the actions taken in Britain to deal with the sanitary problems that lead to cholera outbreaks within its borders, this racialized pathology should be read as a part of a convenient deflection of a universal problem onto other bodies and places as part of a process of producing and regulating Indian space and Indian bodies, and of legitimizing imperial interventions. David Arnold describes a similar process in his consideration of the racializing pathology of Malaria in Imperial Bangladesh (79). And David Spurr's reading of journalistic representations of AIDS in Africa alerts us to new manifestations of this debasement trope (89-91).

⁴ This act of cultural erasure is complemented by his name change: Sarosh changes his name to Sid upon arrival in Canada, overwriting his connection to his Parsi community with this new name.

⁵ Savukshaw is a Parsi name, variously spelled as Savakshaw or Savaksha.

⁶ There were two versions of this film, the first released in 1936, the second in 1954. Despite the fact that the 1936 version was immensely popular, I have assumed that the allusion is to the 1954 version of the film for three reasons: first, because that would make it contemporary with *Bridge on the River Kwai*, the other film Nariman alludes to through his whistling; second, because the 1936 version of the film was often called "Indian Love Call" to avoid confusion with the later version (Paquin); and third, because Slim Whitman's 1955 cover of the song was immensely popular, holding the number one spot for a record twelve weeks on the British pop charts ("Slim Whitman").

⁷ Here I make use of Terry Goldie's notions of indigenization to characterize a specific discursive mode. According to Goldie, "In their need to become 'native,' to belong here, whites in Canada, New Zealand, and Australia have adopted a process which I have termed 'indigenization.' A peculiar word, it suggests the impossible necessity of becoming indigenous" (13).

⁸ Thanks to Paul Milton, who called my attention to this allusion before I had read "Squatter" for the first time. Nariman alludes to the following lines from Thayer's poem:

And now the leather-covered sphere came hurtling through the air,
And Casey stood a-watching it in haughty grandeur there.
Close by the sturdy batsman the ball unheeded sped —
"That ain't my style," said Casey. "Strike one," the umpire said.

From the benches, black with people, there went up a muffled roar,
Like the beating of the storm-waves on a stern and distant shore.
"Kill him! Kill the umpire!" shouted someone on the stand;
And it's likely they'd have killed him had not Casey raised his hand.

With a smile of Christian charity great Casey's visage shone;
 He stilled the rising tumult; he bade the game go on;
 He signaled to the pitcher, and once more the dun sphere flew;
 But Casey still ignored it, and the umpire said, "Strike two!" (29-40)

⁹ Nariman alludes to the opening lines of *Anna Karenina*: "All happy families resemble one another, but each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way" (Tolstoy 1).

¹⁰ Nariman alludes to Othello's final speech:

I pray you, in your letters,
 When you shall these unlucky deeds relate,
 Speak of me as I am; nothing extenuate,
 Nor set down aught in malice. Then must you speak
 Of one that lov'd not wisely but too well;
 Of one not easily jealous, but being wrought,
 Perplexed in the extreme; of one whose hand
 (Like the base [Indian]) threw a pearl away
 Richer than all his tribe; of one whose subdu'd eyes,
 Albeit unused to the melting mood,
 Drop tears as fast as the Arabian trees
 Their medicinable gum. Set you down this;
 And say besides, that in Aleppo once,
 Where a malignant and a turban'd Turk
 Beat a Venetian and traduc'd the state,
 I took by th' throat the circumcised dog,
 And smote him — thus. (5.2.340-56)

It seems telling that he has omitted from his allusion the simile of the base Indian throwing away a pearl richer than his tribe. This omission is consistent with the regulatory imperative of his narrative, which ostensibly suggests that Sarosh's error is in leaving Bombay, not in leaving Canada, the equivalent of pearl-like Desdemona.

¹¹ For this explicit connection between evacuation and homelessness in Mistry's fiction, I am indebted to an unknown participant who attended my session at the triennial conference of the Association of Commonwealth Language and Literature Studies in Canberra, Australia, July 2001.

WORKS CITED

- Anderson, Warwick. "Excremental Colonialism: Public Health and the Poetics of Pollution." *Critical Inquiry* 21 (1995): 640-69.
- Arnold, David. *Science, Technology and Medicine in Colonial India*. New York: Cambridge UP, 2000.
- Bakhtin, Mikhail. *Rabelais and his World*. Trans. Helene Iswolsky. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1984.
- Bharucha, Nilufer E. "'When Old Tracks are Lost': Rohinton Mistry's Fiction as Diasporic Discourse." *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 30.2 (1995): 57-64.
- Bridge on the River Kwai*. Dir. David Lean. Perf. Alec Guinness, William Holden, Jack Hawkins, Sessue Hayakawa, Geoffrey Horne, James Donald, Andre Morell, and Ann Sears. Columbia, 1957.
- Churchill, Winston. "We Shall Fight on the Beaches." *The Winston Churchill Home Page*.

- The Churchill Center, Washington, DC. 31 December 2002. <<http://www.winston-churchill.org/speeches/fight.htm>>.
- Esty, Joshua D. "Excremental Postcolonialism." *Contemporary Literature* 40.1 (1999): 22-59.
- Goldie, Terry. *Fear and Temptation: The Image of the Indigene in Canadian, Australian, and New Zealand Literatures*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's UP, 1989.
- "Greer grating, Mistry complains." *Edmonton Journal* 18 November 1996: B7.
- Heble, Ajay. "A Foreign Presence in the Stall: Towards a Poetics of Cultural Hybridity in Rohinton Mistry's Migration Stories." *Canadian Literature* 137 (1993): 51-61.
- Malak, Amin. "The Shahrazadic Tradition: Rohinton Mistry's *Such a Long Journey* and the Art of Storytelling." *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 29.2 (1993): 108-18.
- "Mistry calls criticism of his book 'asinine.'" *Canadian Press* (London). *Canoe: Jam!Books*. 17 November 1996. 31 December 2002. <http://www.canoe.ca/JamBooksFeatures/mistry_rohinton.html>.
- Mistry, Rohinton. *Family Matters*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 2002.
- . "Squatter." *Tales from Firozsha Baag*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1987. 145-69.
- Mukherjee, Arun. "Narrating India." *Toronto South Asian Review* 10.2 (1992): 82-91.
- Naipaul, V.S. *An Area of Darkness*. 1964. London: The Reprint Society, 1966.
- Paquin, Alexandre. "The Singing Mountie Gets His Man, Hollywood Gets an F in Geography: 'Rose-Marie' (1936)." June 23, 2001. August 1, 2002. <<http://www.film-criticism.com/rosemarie.html>>.
- Ramasubban, Radhika. "Imperial Health in British India, 1857-1900." *Disease, Medicine and Empire: Perspectives on Western Medicine and the Experience of European Expansion*. Ed. Roy MacLeod and Milton Lewis. New York: Routledge, 1988. 38-60.
- Rose Marie*. Dir. Mervyn LeRoy. Perf. Ann Blyth, Howard Keel, Fernando Lamas, Bert Lahr, Marjorie Main, and Joan Taylor. MGM 1954.
- Ross, Robert L. "Seeking and Maintaining Balance: Rohinton Mistry's Fiction." *World Literature Today* 17.2 (1999): 239-44.
- Shakespeare, William. *Othello*. *The Riverside Shakespeare*. Ed. G. Blakemore Evans. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974. 1198-1248.
- "Slim Whitman." *BBC Online - Radio 2 - Country - Artist Database*. British Broadcasting Corporation. 12 August 2002. <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio2/country/artistdb/whitmanslim.shtml>>.
- Spurr, David. *The Rhetoric of Empire: Colonial Discourse in Journalism, Travel Writing, and Imperial Administration*. Durham: Duke UP, 1993.
- Suleri, Sara. *The Rhetoric of English India*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1992.
- Thayer, Ernest Lawrence. "Casey at the Bat." *Selected Poetry of Ernest Lawrence Thayer (1863-1940)*. *Representative Poetry Online*. University of Toronto English Library. 31 December 2002. <<http://www.library.utoronto.ca/utel/rp/poems/thayer1.html>>.
- Tolstoy, Leo. *Anna Karenina*. Trans. Louise and Aylmer Maude. New York: Norton, 1968.