

ROHINTON MISTRY'S *SQUATTER* – A STUDY IN SHAHRAZADIC NARRATIVE MODE

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ABSTRACT: *Rohinton Mistry's narratives draw upon Western realism, the Arabian Nights – Shahrazadic – mode as well as Indian narrative styles, which foreground the role of the narrator or Sutradhar.... Mistry's Squatter is amenable to a critical reading in the light of the art of oral narrative in Shahrazadic tradition, which prescribes Sense of Audience, Sense of Heritage and values, Reliable Reporting in Private and Collective Memory, Blending Modes and Moods, Digression and Orality/Literacy.*

KEYWORDS: Shahrazadic Tradition, Rohinton Mistry, Oral Narrative, Micro Narrative, Larger Narrative, Audience, Heritage,

Article

Rohinton Mistry is an excellent story teller who, to paraphrase Labov's (1997) words about the characteristics of a good story teller, "is someone who can make something out of nothing, who can engage our attention with a fascinating elaboration of detail that is entertaining, amusing and emotionally rewarding".¹

The volume, *Tales from Firozsha Baag*, is a collection of interlinked stories, in which there are micro narratives within the larger narrative in many stories. Sometimes two points of view are adopted simultaneously, which are interwoven together in a very skillful manner, presenting two different perspectives.

Bharucha (2003: p.41)² observes that Mistry's narratives draw upon Western realism, the Arabian Nights – Shahrazadic – mode as well as Indian narrative styles which foreground the role of the narrator or *Sutradhar*....

The Shahrazadic narrative mode has been used by other Indian Postcolonial writers too – notably Salman Rushdie, particularly in *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* and by Githa Hariharan in *When Dreams Travel*.

Rohinton Mistry's *Squatter* can be read as oral narrative in the Shahrazadic tradition. *Squatter* is a story about Sarosh the 'unassimilated immigrant in a country', who failed in complete adaptation to a Canadian setting in the way he defined it and within the self-imposed time frame of a decade.

All the salient features of storytelling in Shahrazadic tradition, as enumerated by Amin Malik (1993: p.108-118)³, are furnished below and an attempt is made to offer a critical reading of *Squatter* in the light of the art of storytelling in Shahrazadic tradition.

Sense of Audience: In any story told orally, the audience's comprehension, engagement, response, and sympathy are crucial.

As the story begins, Nariman returns home in his car from the library where he works. It is an established practice for Nariman to tell the children a story as soon as he comes home in the evening. Children gather round him and ask him to tell a story. Nariman is an effective storyteller who knows how to ignite enthusiasm, and where to give a temporary pause to stoke the flame of interest and curiosity. He asks rhetorical questions and then again continues telling the story. Exactly at a crucial spot where the climax is reached, he suspends the story telling until the next day.

Nariman is a master storyteller and the children who gather round him love to listen to his stories. So the common goal here is the narration and appreciation of a story which is always successfully done. While narrating the story, Nariman keeps asking questions like 'Do you know what happened?' expecting the boys to shout in chorus 'What happened uncle?' The boys know this and they keep asking him what happened. Typical of a story teller, Nariman wants to see his listeners excited and curious so that they keep asking questions like what happened... where... why and so on

This is how one of the characters in the present story, Jehangir, sums up Nariman's narrative technique:

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 (p.147)⁴

Sense of Heritage and values: That both the storyteller and the audience share common codes speaks volumes about the social function of the storyteller as a repository of the community ethos, recorder/reminder of shared perceptions, and spokesperson articulating feelings, attitudes and judgments.

The storyteller Nariman and the audience share common Parsi heritage and values. The elderly Nariman offers a reliable report of Parsi Heritage and values.

Reliable Reporting in Private and Collective Memory: In order to accept and appreciate the report(ing), one needs a trustworthy report; one needs to establish rapport with the rapporteur.

There are two important characters in this story. The first one is Sarosh whom the story is about. The second one is Nariman Hansotia, the communal storyteller of the Baag and clearly the voice of Mistry, who assumes professional proportions in presenting the story of Sarosh to the children of the Baag.

Blending Modes and Moods: Storytelling as a craft involves at times blending different modes of expression to serve stylistic and thematic intentions.

First, Nariman begins telling the story of a great cricketer Savukshaw. Savukshaw was a famous cricketer who saved the Indian team from a humiliating defeat in England. In his usual style, Naraman tells something about the composition of Indian cricket team and then begins narrating what happened as though he was giving a live commentary. Mistry has a narrative technique in which he intersperses his narration of the events with the description of

persons, their attitudes and the environment in general. He introduces other characters like Jehangir, Kersi and Viraaf who also appeared in previous stories and thus attains a sense of unity among all the stories. It also makes the stories a series of episodes rather than completely independent stories. Further, the characters appear to be livelier because of their appearance repeatedly, which shows a gradual evolution in some characters. The readers also experience a sense of familiarity as they keep encountering the characters repeatedly.

Continuing his story telling, Nariman describes in a systematic manner with all the details about the fielding positions, how Savukshaw batted and how the fielder, who tried to stop it, broke his hand and how the ball itself was split in to two halves. Nariman goes on to tell more about Savukshaw about how he switched from one kind of sport to another and excelled in each one equally well, surpassing all the previous records. Finally, he took up hunting and met a tiger with in a distance of twelve feet from him. Exactly at this point, Nariman's wife calls him to come in to have his dinner and Nariman suspends the story telling in the middle and never completes it.

For his next story, he takes up Sarosh, a fellow Parsi who migrated to Canada ten years ago and returned home, feeling depressed and lost.

Digression: As the most striking feature of storytelling, digressions are meant to defy or de-emphasize linear, rigid narrative cohesion, or self-indulgent insularity.

In the present story, Nariman is shown to narrate two stories – one about Savukshaw, a great cricketer; second, Sarosh, a Canadian immigrant who came back to India under conditions beyond his control

In his first narration, Nariman narrates the various skills and talents of Savukshaw and finally ends his narration with Savukshaw in a face-to-face situation with a tiger and promises the children to complete the story later, which he never does.

In his next narration, Nariman tells the story of Sarosh, a Parsi from Firozsha Baag who emigrated to Canada ten years ago. He begins the story by giving a picture of his problem, which is the theme of his narration. After introducing the problem and the sufferer, Nariman goes back ten years in time and begins from the time when Sarosh started planning his departure to Canada.

The micro narrative, narrative within narrative is sometimes is offered by the communal storyteller Nariman. The boys of the Firozsha Baag are the audience.

Orality/Literacy: Storytelling is obviously a phenomenon of the oral tradition; the novel is a product of literacy.

The narrator Nariman Hansotia creates diverse kinds of scenes through the narration of his stories. In the first story, that of Savukshaw, Nariman takes the readers to a virtual cricket ground and brings alive before their eyes an ongoing cricket match. Frequently Mistry keeps coming back to the physical setting of Firozsha Baag and the story-telling scene and takes off to another scene.

In his second narration, Nariman first creates the setting of Sarosh's flat where the scene is that of farewell to Sarosh and from there the readers are taken to Canada. In the physical setting of Canada, Sarosh is shown to be struggling with his problem. Finally, the scene shifts

to the office of Dr. No-Ilaaz from where again it shifts to airport and ultimately to Bombay. There is a circular imaginative tour of the readers, starting from Bombay to various settings and scenes and finally landing where the journey began.

The problems of assimilation and acculturation, the pangs of displacement and yearning for a home and feelings of isolation pervade this story. It is possible that Mistry himself being an immigrant has seen some of these problems from close quarters, if not experienced them and hence the problems come out in these stories quite vividly through the articulate storyteller Nariman, the spokesperson of Rohinton Mistry. Mistry aptly named the collection *Tales from Firozsha Baag*, only to suggest the primacy of his oral narrative strategy.

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