

# Rohinton Mistry's Family Shakespeare

Deanne Williams, York University

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## Abstract

This article examines the significance of Shakespeare in the work of Rohinton Mistry, especially *Such A Long Journey* (1991). Born in Bombay and emigrating to Canada in 1975, Mistry is a Canadian novelist who writes primarily about the India of his youth. His use of Shakespeare signals Canada's shared heritage with India as former British colonies, allowing Mistry to participate doubly in the postcolonial tradition of creative engagement with Shakespeare. It demonstrates, as well, that Canadian appropriations of Shakespeare extend beyond French, English, and native Canada, calling attention to Shakespeare's particular meaning and relevance within the large population of Indo-Canadians. Through Shakespeare, Mistry addresses the problems faced by contemporary urban Indians and Canadians alike: the trials and tribulations of immigration, the limitations and vulnerabilities of classic liberal multiculturalism and its cosmopolitan ideals, and the challenges of membership in a minority community.

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*Shakespeare is like Bombay. — Rohinton Mistry, Family Matters*

Mr. Kapur loves his Shakespeare. In Rohinton Mistry's most recent novel, *Family Matters* (2002), Shiv Sena extremists attack and destroy Mr. Kapur's sporting-goods shop after he fails to replace the word "Bombay" on its sign with "Mumbai." Mr. Kapur laments, "Nothing is left now except to talk of graves, of worms, and epitaphs. Let us sit upon these chairs and tell sad stories of the death of cities" (Mistry 2002, 295). Richard II's expression of resignation at the moment when he realizes that he is to be deposed speaks to Mr. Kapur's own feeling of powerlessness against the rise of the Hindu right:

Let's talk of graves, of worms, of epitaphs,  
... Our lands, our lives and all are Bolingbroke's,  
And nothing can we call our own but death;  
And that small model of the barren earth  
Which serves as paste and cover to our bones.  
For God's sake, let us sit upon the ground

And tell sad stories of the death of kings. (3.2.143, 151-56)<sup>1</sup>

Sitting on the ground and telling old tales is one of Shakespeare's favorite ways to signify defeat. In *Richard II*, it is a dramatic, if undignified, gesture that reflects the king's love of fiction and fantasy. In *King Lear*, it is Lear's hopelessly optimistic impulse when he finds himself imprisoned with Cordelia: ". . . so we'll live / And pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh / At gilded butterflies" (*King Lear*, 5.3.11-13). In each case, it is the gesture of someone about to die: Mr. Kapur will soon be murdered by the Shiv Sena.

*Richard II* resonates with Mr. Kapur's unrealistic optimism in the face of doom, as the shopkeeper seeks to preserve his vision of the possibilities of multicultural harmony in Bombay. When his employee Yezad, an observant Zoroastrian, suggests that he turn to "Indian sources" instead of Shakespeare, Mr. Kapur defends Shakespeare as the best way to express his hope that Bombay will remain a place of tolerance and inclusion: "Shakespeare is like Bombay. In them both, you can find whatever you need — they contain the universe" (Mistry 2002, 295). Comparing Shakespeare to Bombay (and not the other way around), Mr. Kapur associates Shakespeare with his beloved city that offers a home for everyone, a home that he is losing to nationalism and to the ideologies of racial and cultural purity that would have India remain a home only for some.

From his first collection of short stories, *Swimming Lessons and Other Stories from Firozsha Baag* (1987), to his most recent novel, *Family Matters* (2002), Mistry quotes Shakespeare, alludes to Shakespeare, and reworks Shakespeare. To a certain extent, Mistry's work is an extension of Shakespeare's longstanding association with British imperialism: To mention Shakespeare in an Indian context is, inevitably, to invoke the history of an English presence in India and to recall Macaulay's infamous "class of persons Indian in blood and color, but English in tastes, in opinion, in morals and intellect" (Macaulay 1952, 729). Yet Shakespeare appears in Mistry's work less as an icon of British imperialism, or as a source for colonial reminiscences, than as a shared frame of reference and inspiration for Mistry as an author and for his characters. Like Mr. Kapur, Mistry alters and adapts Shakespeare, creating new versions of Shakespeare's plays and famous passages that address his own concerns: namely, the Parsi community of late twentieth-century Bombay, or, as he puts it in an interview, "the lives of those children in the old world" (Hancock 1989, 143).

A novelist whose greatest inspiration lies in the domestic and the diurnal, Mistry uses Shakespeare to negotiate questions of home and of belonging, not only as a family member, but also as a member of a larger community. Through stories of life at home, he charts the increasing polarization of Indian politics and the demise of a progressive vision of religious and cultural coexistence: a vision that, as his novels show, is increasingly under threat. However, as

a touchstone for the ideals as well as challenges of living in a multicultural community, Mistry participates in a postcolonial tradition of creative engagement with Shakespeare that speaks not only to the India of his birth, but also to the Canada in which he makes his home. Born in Bombay in 1955 and emigrating to Canada in 1975, Mistry writes about India from the vantage point of Brampton, Ontario, a suburban community just outside of Toronto. Thus, while Mistry's treatment of Shakespeare is determined by India's specific history with the Bard, his novels also contribute to the distinguished tradition of Canadian Shakespeares.<sup>2</sup>

Germaine Greer made a notorious comment on British television about Mistry's magisterial *A Fine Balance* (1996): "I hate this book. It's a Canadian book about India. What could be worse? What could be more terrible?" Although mean-spirited, Greer's comment does acknowledge Mistry's status between cultures and countries. Indeed, Mistry may be considered doubly postcolonial, as he writes not from the former imperial center, like V. S. Naipaul or the early Salman Rushdie, but instead from another former colony. A secular and multi-ethnic Parliamentary democracy governs Canada, as it does India. One of the last members of the British Commonwealth to sever its formal ties with Britain, Canada has its own history of racialized oppression.<sup>3</sup> The cultural and pedagogical legacy of what was once known as the British Commonwealth, Shakespeare highlights the "familial" relationship between India and Canada (which now has a South Asian population of roughly one million, half of whom live in the greater Toronto area).

As Mistry charts the rise of communal tensions and violence in Bombay — a city that envisions itself, like Toronto, as a haven of tolerance and inclusion — he uses Shakespeare to engage in an ongoing dialogue with his current Canadian home about the problems faced by these "world class" cities: the trials and tribulations of immigration, the limitations and vulnerabilities of classic liberal multiculturalism and its cosmopolitan ideals, and the challenges of membership in a minority community.

### Not Wisely But Too Well

India has long considered Shakespeare to be a member of the family. In his famous homage to Shakespeare, Rabindranath Tagore (who was able to recite whole scenes of Shakespeare from memory) insists that Shakespeare can "flood with light the mind of the whole world" (Tagore 1991, line 12).<sup>4</sup> Tagore's evaluation of Shakespearean universality may sound old-fashioned, but his words suggest how, to use Ania Loomba's formulation, the "easy polarity between 'us' and 'them'" (Loomba 1997, 138) and the binaries of colonial education and postcolonial subversion are transformed into a register of inspiration and appropriation. When Tagore muses, "Shakespeare's

plays have always been our ideal of drama. Their complexity, due to multiple branches of plot, . . . [has] attracted our mind from the very beginning" (quoted in Singh 1996, 138), he is judging Shakespeare not on how much India has to learn from him, but on what Shakespeare has to offer India. As in Canada, where Shakespeare has provided an artistic impetus as much as a model, Indian Shakespeares can be defined primarily by their heterogeneity. While we cannot discount Shakespeare's longstanding association with the history of British imperialism, it is important to acknowledge that this does not produce a static relationship between Shakespeare and India or Canada. Instead, this imperial history produces a myriad of responses and transformations that elude easy classification as either emulation or subversion.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Parsi theater successfully adapted Shakespeare for popular consumption (see Gupt 2005, Hansen 2001, Luhrmann 1996, Loomba 1997, and Singh 1989 and 1996, pages 120-52).<sup>5</sup> Beginning with the Oriental Theatrical Company, founded in Bombay in 1868, and then in theaters founded in Lahore, Delhi, and Calcutta, the Parsi theater constituted one of the primary means of access to Shakespeare in colonial India. It reached its height in the 1920s and 1930s and eventually played a major role in the development of Indian cinema. Although it drew upon the longstanding British tradition of amateur theatricals, as well as on the influence of touring Western theater companies such as the one dramatized in Merchant and Ivory's 1965 *Shakespeare Wallah*, the Parsi theater was anything but faithful to the Bard or to British culture. Following a Sanskrit rule against tragic conclusions, its adaptations of Shakespeare loosely followed the lines of the plays, often rewriting tragedies with a happy ending and interweaving indigenous songs and poetry into the outline of Shakespeare's plots. Treating Shakespeare not with kid gloves, but as just one of numerous available options and traditions, the Parsi theater brought together Hindus, Muslims, Jews, and Christians from all social classes, allowing dramatic art to emerge out of cultural mixture. Cutting across linguistic, religious, and class lines, this de-centered and pluralistic art form incorporated elements of the many participating cultures.

The Parsi theater continually revised, reinvented, and reinterpreted Shakespeare. As Kathryn Hansen explains, "The Parsi theater was not devised by the colonial rulers as a tool of 'divide and rule,' nor as a means of robbing the Subcontinent of its indigenous dramatic traditions. It was a hybrid formation that consolidated local expressive arts within a pan-Indian style of representation" (Hansen 2001, 60-61). Mary Louise Pratt uses the ethnographic idea of "transculturation" to describe the methods and means by which marginal or subordinate groups "select and invent from materials transmitted to them by a dominant or metropolitan

culture" (Pratt 1992, 6); however, the Parsi theater transformed Shakespeare with an ease and sheer lack of reverence that transcends the binary of dominant and subordinate. As Loomba puts it: "Whereas [currently fashionable accounts of hybridity in post-colonial theory] emphasize the psychic dislocations between black skins and white masks, and the mimicry of colonial culture by colonized subjects, the performances we are considering here were not conducted with attitudes of reverence towards Shakespeare or Western theater, nor did they force the performers to abandon their own forms of acting" (1997, 119).

Yet for Mistry, who grew up in 1950s and 1960s Bombay, the Parsi theater was past its heyday and had been replaced by Bollywood cinema. Mistry's treatment of Shakespeare is thus bound up with what T. M. Luhrmann calls a "quintessentially Parsi" nostalgia: "the sense of the glories of the community's recent and distant past, the embarrassment about the present" (1996, 60), as the elite Parsi community, which enjoyed a favored position with the British, faced an identity crisis and decline in the years following partition. A touchstone, paradoxically, for both the Parsi theater's populist form of cultural hybridity and also nostalgia for the lost status of the Parsi community, Shakespeare symbolizes the past glories and current difficulties facing the Bombay Parsi. The process of invoking at once the past and the present applies to Shakespeare in Canada as well, where Shakespeare's prior association with anglophone ascendancy is countered by the plentiful engagements with Shakespeare from multiple subject positions: francophone, First Nations, gay and lesbian, and allophone.

In Mistry's first short story collection, *Swimming Lessons and Other Stories from Firozsha Baag* (1987), Shakespeare functions as a talisman for the transcendence of linguistic, religious, and cultural difference. In "The Collectors," Dr. Mody hatches plans for his son to "acquire the best from the cultures of East and West, thrill to the words of Tagore and Shakespeare" (Mistry 1987, 82). His primary expression of cultural ecumenicalism, however, is stamp collecting: "I have many contacts in foreign countries. Because of my job, I meet the experts from abroad who are invited by the Indian Government. When I tell them about my hobby, they send me stamps from their countries" (88). Mocked by his son, the overgrown Pesi, Mody cultivates a friendship with the epicoene Jehangir, who eventually replaces Pesi in his heart. Through a mutual appreciation for philately, Mody's "affection for the boy developed and started to linger around the region hitherto occupied by grief bearing Pesi's name" (84). Years later, when Jehangir inherits Mody's collection, he finds it infested with ants and cockroaches, the priceless stamps transformed into "worthless paper scraps" (103). Mody's discovery of a surrogate son to replace the one he rejected constitutes only a temporary antidote for a long-term problem. When Mody dies, with his son in reform school

and his marriage a shambles, his disintegrating stamp collection is, like his love for Shakespeare, a sign of his confused priorities, having rejected his family to form flimsy bonds with others.

While the idea of Shakespeare signals the limitations of cosmopolitanism in "The Collectors," in "Squatter" Shakespeare's *Othello* provides the terms for the confusion that surrounds the dream of immigration. This story portrays the difficulties of leaving the old world to seek one's fortunes in the new: "Squatter" denotes Sarosh's inability to accommodate himself to Western toilets. For Sarosh (who adopts the name Sid when he moves to Toronto), the trials of immigration are identified with the elemental process of excretion and with the infantilizing experience of toilet-training: "We find 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" (Mistry 1987, 153). After ten years of "squatting" in Canada — the idea of the "squatter" also suggests his feeling of homelessness — Sarosh/Sid decides to return to Bombay for good, convinced that he is fundamentally unsuited for life in Canada, "surrounded by vacuum cleaners and dishwashers and big shiny motor-cars" (155). And it is in a state of limbo, in an airplane taxiing down a Toronto runway, that Sarosh is able finally to do the deed. Having let go of the fantasy of complete assimilation, Sarosh accommodates himself, once and for all, to the Western toilet.<sup>6</sup>

Whereas cross-cultural contact is, for Shakespeare's *Othello*, experienced through the lens of sexual jealousy, what Sarosh loves "not wisely but too well" is the fantasy of Canada as a hospitable home. He adapts this famous speech from *Othello* to express his experience of failed assimilation during a brief visit to Bombay, in which he discovers that India has, itself, become a foreign land. This is Shakespeare's version:

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 loved 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. (*Othello*, 5.2.337-44)

Caught between cultures, Sarosh identifies himself with *Othello*, who once defended a Christian who was beaten by a Turk, only to be, himself, "beaten" by the Venetians. Sarosh discards the "pearl" of India — family, friends, tradition — by emigrating to Canada in an effort to become, among other things, "richer than all his tribe," just as he subsequently throws away the "pearl"

of opportunity represented by the West.<sup>7</sup> Walking along Marine Drive in Bombay, Sarosh uses Othello's famous lines to express the pain of being a stranger, caught between two cultures and at home in neither:

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. (168)

The fantasy land of milk and honey (described in *Family Matters* as "not just the land of milk and honey, also the land of deodorant and toiletry" [Mistry 2002, 131]), has offered, not miraculous and succulent sustenance, but constipation. Prized above pearls, what Sarosh really loses is the genuine feeling of belonging to a community: a feeling that he neither achieves in Toronto nor preserves in Bombay. Yet immigration has become a "pain in the posterior" because of the pressure Sarosh places upon himself to assimilate totally into Canadian society, to "become completely Canadian" (155). This is Sarosh's error: He mistakes a particular detail concerning the performance of private functions as the determining feature of membership in Canadian society. In other words, as soon as he stops worrying about his own squatting, Sarosh is no longer just a squatter in Canada.

For Mistry, the trials of immigration are Janus-faced — as he puts it, "looking forward and yearning backward" (Mistry 1987, 258). His short stories reflect upon the challenges of immigration as well as the meditations upon home that inevitably occur while away from home. As Mistry ironizes the ideals of belonging, references to Shakespeare are tinged with a bitterness produced by the contrast between high hopes and dismal realities, and the pain occasioned by sacrificing home and family to individual aspiration. *Othello*, a tragedy of inter-racial love and cross-cultural conflict, serves as an apt point of reference for the distinctions Mistry draws, not only between the old world of India and the new world of Canada, but also between the old and new India. In *Such a Long Journey* (1991), a line from *Othello* plays a major role in Gustad Noble's involvement in a RAW (Research and Analysis Wing) money-laundering operation, based upon a scandal that rocked Indira Gandhi's government in the 1970s.<sup>8</sup> In a world of cynical corruption, Shakespeare looks back to the privileged life enjoyed by Gustad Noble's ancestors and lost after Independence: a simple, orderly, "old world" to which Gustad remains attached. At the same time, Iago's line, "put money in thy purse" (*Othello*, 1.3.330), resonates with the big-city ethos of selfishness and greed.

Following instructions sent to him in a letter by Jimmy Bilimoria, a family friend and retired army major, Gustad goes to a bazaar to pick up a mysterious bundle of rupees. He is instructed to

meet his connection at a pavement bookstall which prominently displays *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*: "And just to be absolutely certain if it is the right one," advises Bilimoria, "open the book to *Othello*, end of act I, scene iii, where Iago gives advice to Roderigo. The line: 'Put money in thy purse' will be underlined in red" (Mistry 1991, 91). In *Othello*, when Iago advises Roderigo to "put money in thy purse," he means that Roderigo should take the initiative in pursuit of his desires: bide his time, disguise his intentions, and, specifically, sell off his property to fund his (and Iago's) trip to Cyprus. In *Such A Long Journey*, Iago's words have a more literal referent, as the volume of Shakespeare's works actually contains money. They suggest the heartless individualism demanded by the social and political chaos of 1971 Bombay, in which Gustad finds his old values to be of no use. No longer strolling through the book-lined corridors of his childhood memories, Gustad finds himself scurrying among the bookstalls of a filthy bazaar.

Like Shakespeare's Roderigo, the aptly-named Gustad (or "buddy") is eager to follow the instructions of his friend, although, unlike Roderigo, he manages to escape with his life. Bilimoria, however, is no Iago. Named for the famous Bollywood actor, D. Billimoria, Bilimoria is just another Roderigo, credulously following orders from the RAW that will eventually kill him. A Shakespearean proverb applicable to the ethos of 1970s India, Bilimoria's "Put money in thy purse" also recalls the names of villains from Christopher Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta*. The name Bilimoria sounds like a combination of the Marlovian characters Pilia-Borza, Bellamira, and Ithamore. Moreover, Pilia-Borza has much in common with the Italian word for "cutpurse," *tagliaborza*. With the courtesan Bellamira (whose name means, essentially, "easy on the eyes"), Pilia-Borza extorts money from Barabas by means of letters relayed to him with the help of their servant, Ithamore. Barabas manages to poison the conspirators, but not before they have passed along information about Barabas's exploits to the governor of Malta. Gustad, similarly, receives his instructions in letters from Bilimoria, and he is expected to deposit the money in a bank account in the name of Mira Obili (an anagram for Bilimoria, but also an invocation of Marlowe's Bellamira), emphasizing the extent to which Gustad's involvement in his friend's scheme constitutes a form of procurement, even prostitution. "Obili" puns on the Latin *oblino*, to defile, as well as *oblatus*, something left behind or offered up, while "Mira" contains the obvious exhortation to see: see what is being, or has been, sacrificed or left behind.

Set in Venice and Cyprus — sites, like Bombay and Toronto, of great cultural and religious mixture — *Othello* fastens not only on the poignant sense of loss and disorientation experienced by the displaced yet heroic Othello, but also on the callous rootlessness of the Venetian expatriates. Paralleling *Othello*'s Cyprus with the Malta of *The Jew of Malta* (another Mediterranean place with an unusual amount of ethnic mixture), *Such A Long Journey* draws on early modern sites of



heterogeneity that resonate with the diversity of 1970s Bombay. As in "Squatter," when Sarosh uses a speech from *Othello* to express the impossibility of erasing cultural difference, when Gustad and Bilimoria use Iago and Roderigo as a point of reference ("Forget Iago's advice" writes Bilimoria, "Ten *lakh* won't fit in your purse" [Mistry 1991, 120]), their self-conscious participation in a Shakespearean paradigm manifests neither irony nor reverence, but comfortable familiarity. Mistry's characters have a relationship with Shakespeare that transcends the limits of allusion or appropriation. Instead, Mistry depicts, and reflects upon, the workings of a mentality that has assimilated Shakespeare totally and cannot but regard the world through Shakespearean paradigms. "Left behind" by the British, Shakespeare and Marlowe are used by Mistry as a common ground — used, underlined, read, shared.

### The Division of the Kingdom

Like his stories about the immigrant experience, Mistry's accounts of the political problems of late twentieth-century Bombay speak to the challenges of citizenship in Canada as well as India. They draw particular attention to the difficulties faced by the multi-ethnic and democratic traditions to which Canada and India continue to aspire. As a result, Mistry's Shakespeare has little to do with *The Tempest*, a play with a long and distinguished history of postcolonial adaptation. Instead, his Shakespearean frame of reference is tragic, sharing in the genre's interest in the political sphere: *Richard II*, a play that is tragic as much as historical; *Othello*, which concerns the victimization of an outsider; and *King Lear*, a play that sets family troubles off against a larger, national backdrop. *Such A Long Journey* parallels Lear's loss of power with the experiences of Gustad Noble and his family. As Mistry explores the violent disputes, rivalries, and betrayals that occur within a family framework, *King Lear*'s dramatization of the psychological as well as political results of "the division of the kingdom" (1.1.3) provides him with a pattern for addressing the social, political, and cultural questions of belonging that the Bombay Parsi community, and India as a whole, faced in the decades following partition. Yet as it moves, with guarded optimism, toward a positive resolution to these conflicts, *Such A Long Journey* participates in the Parsi theater's tradition of transforming Shakespearean tragedy by means of a happy ending.

Along with quotations from Rabindranath Tagore and Firdausi's *Shah-Nama*, an excerpt from T. S. Eliot's "Journey of the Magi" (a Bengali version of which was produced by Tagore in 1930) stands as an epigraph to *Such A Long Journey* and as the inspiration for its title: "A cold coming we had of it / Just the worst time of the year / For a journey, and such a long journey" ("The Journey of the Magi," in Eliot 1963, lines 1-3). According to tradition, the Magi who attended the birth of Christ were Zoroastrians: ancestors of the Bombay Parsi community who arrived in India in the

tenth century, retreating from Muslim expansion. Like Gustad, Eliot's Magi miss the easy living they have left behind, "the summer palaces on slopes, the terraces, / And the silken girls bringing sherbet" (lines 9-10), yet they are, nonetheless, determined to make the journey and to bear witness and participate in the new world represented by the birth of Christ:<sup>9</sup>

. . . [T]his Birth was  
 Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.  
 We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,  
 But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,  
 With an alien people clutching their gods.  
 I should be glad of another death. (lines 38-43)

Eliot's handling of the story of the Magi emphasizes the tragedy of being caught between cultures, even eras, and the realization that one can never go home. "The Journey of the Magi" relates to Gustad's sense of being caught between the old and the new India. It is the birth of an independent India that causes such "hard and bitter agony" for Gustad. The kingdom in which he is "no longer at ease" is 1970s Bombay, where an alien people, who figure not at all in his memories of membership in a political and social élite, clutch at the democratic gods of social reform and political equality. The world of his childhood, a world identified with the forms of cultural hegemony symbolized by Shakespeare and T. S. Eliot, is over, and what it stands for has been devalued and discredited.<sup>10</sup>

Like Lear, Gustad is a relic from a former age, his kingdom replaced by a new and brutal world order. Lear clings to an image of himself that is tied to the warrior-aristocracy; Gustad clings to memories of bourgeois prosperity. Both reflect upon the process of divestment: the bankruptcy of Gustad's grandfather's furniture business, "Noble and Sons, Makers of Fine Furniture," brought about the loss of his family's social and economic position. Gustad's attachment to the "few pieces" (Mistry 1991, 6) he was able to salvage are, like Lear's attachment to his retainers, an everpresent reminder of his former social and economic position. Just as Lear, who, confronting Regan about her dismissal of the knights and exhorting "O! reason not the need" (*King Lear*, 2.4.262), identifies his hundred knights with his former chivalric glory, the desks, bookcases, and books that remain provide Gustad with a modicum of comfort as he sits up late at night, tracing the onset of his insomnia to "the day when his father's bookstore had been treacherously despoiled and ruined." Gustad's disposal of Bilimoria's rupees over a series of "one hundred days" (Mistry 1991, 142) mirrors the dispersal of Lear's one hundred retainers from fifty, to twenty-five, and so on. Mistry maps the events of the novel onto this process of diminution: "In early August . . . with the twenty-seventh bundle of money" (147) comes Roshan's mysterious illness, and after the

"thirty-ninth," at which point he will "be halfway there" (171), Gustad commissions a pavement artist to decorate the wall outside his apartment building.

Gustad's recollections of pre-1947 Bombay dwell not only upon the bankruptcy of his grandfather's furniture business, but also upon the loss of his father's bookstore, which "had once been the finest bookstore in the country" (Mistry 1991, 101). Mistry's identification of material possessions with cultural capital ("a small bookcase full of the right books," he muses, "and you are set for life" [103]) evokes the literate, cultured life of urban Parsis under British rule and recalls Macaulay's opinion that "a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia" (17). In an attempt to rebuild this old life in some miniscule way, Gustad's endlessly deferred project with his gifted eldest son, Sohrab, is the construction of a bookcase to hold the few books that did not have to be sold. Gustad keeps his small collection locked in his grandfather's old desk:

E. Cobham Brewer's *Dictionary of Phrase and Fable* and the two volumes of Barère and Leland's *Dictionary of Slang, Jargon, & Cant*, the 1897 edition . . . Some works by Bertrand Russell, a book titled *Mathematics for the Millions*, and Adam Smith's *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* also stood on this shelf. (53)

A thumbnail sketch of contemporary reading practices, Gustad's library is comprised of the vestigial remainders of British literary tradition: phrase and fable, slang and jargon, quoted and anthologized, diminished over time. By contrast, economics and mathematics form the basis of the forward-gazing, technology-oriented, as well as notably pluralist future.

Gustad's books also reflect the career trajectory that Gustad envisions for his gifted eldest son. As Sohrab observes:

Daddy never made pronouncements or dreamed dreams of an artist-son. It was never: my son will paint, my son will act, he will write poetry. No, it was always: my son will be a doctor, he will be an engineer, he will be a research scientist. (Mistry 1991, 66)

Sohrab's artistic inclinations come to light in a childhood production of *King Lear*, his father's "proudest moment":

Sohrab, of course, was *Lear*, producer, director, costume designer, and set designer. He also wrote an abridged version of the play, wisely accepting that even an audience of dotting parents could become catatonic if confronted by more than an hour's worth of ultra-amateurish Shakespeare. (66)

While Sohrab shares his name with a mythical Zoroastrian hero who fights his father Rostum, he also shares it with Sohrab Modi, a Bollywood star of the 1940s and 1950s who got his start as a Shakespearean actor in the Parsi theater and who filmed his adaptation of *Hamlet*, *Khoon Ka Khoon* (or, *Blood for Blood*) (Loomba 1997, 126-27). Sohrab's theatrical ambitions threaten Gustad because they constitute a throwback to the old days. They remind Gustad of his own unrealized dreams of a university education and flaunt the family's diminished circumstances; whereas a literary son may have been indulged in the past, the exigencies of the present demand more practical training.

Sohrab is unwilling to compromise his personal dreams to satisfy his father's unrealized desires, just as Cordelia steadfastly refuses to claim that she loves her father other than according to her "bond; no more nor less" (*King Lear*, 1.1.92). After a calamitous argument on the eve of Sohrab's acceptance into IIT, the Indian Institute of Technology, Gustad muses, "the boy is nothing to me now" (Mistry 1991, 53), replaying the vocabulary of Lear's banishment of Cordelia: "Nothing will come of nothing, speak again" (1.1.88). Banishing Sohrab, Gustad repeats his alienation from his own father, who passed him over for his younger brother, just as Gloucester disinherits Edgar for the younger Edmund,

. . . handing charge of the business to his younger brother, against everyone's advice. For Pappa hated being given advice. The brother had a formidable reputation for drink and for frequenting the racecourse. The speed with which he mortgaged the assets and fueled his vices was astonishing. Gustad's father emerged from hospital to the shambles of what had once been the finest bookstore in the country, and the family never recovered. (101)

Characters from *Such A Long Journey* thus take on different aspects of their Shakespearean counterparts at different times. If Gustad's father, deaf to benevolent, Kent-like advice, makes Gustad a latter-day Edgar, then Gustad's disinheritance of his elder son recapitulates the trials and tribulations of Gloucester.

Gustad's youngest, his daughter Roshan, reveres a blond, blue-eyed doll clad in Cordelia's conventional white dress.<sup>11</sup> King Lear's responsibility for Cordelia's death is also borne by Gustad, whose refusal to sterilize the household water leads to Roshan's life-threatening illness. While Roshan's mysterious affliction and the grotesque fate suffered by her doll at the hands of the mentally-ill Tehmul are consistent with Cordelia's status, throughout *King Lear*, as innocent victim and unwilling sexual pawn, she remains, throughout the novel, the apple of her father's eye (a favored status enjoyed, in *King Lear*, by the diabolical Edmund). However, in the tradition of the

Parsi theater, *Such a Long Journey* ends more happily than *King Lear*, with a vision of fathers and sons reconciled, daughters who live, and a sense of a hopeful future for the Noble family.

However, the novel's happy ending comes at the expense of the brain-damaged Tehmul, who is at once the Fool and a kind of Cordelia. Like Lear's fool, Tehmul is Gustad's constant companion and perpetual nuisance, although his sketchy awareness of Gustad's involvement in the RAW scheme falls far short of the Fool's psychological acumen: "moneymoneymoneymoney. Somuchsomuchsomuchmoney" (Mistry 1991, 117). Tehmul's sexual violation of Roshan's doll ("there was no damage done, except that its pink legs and stomach and groin were sprinkled with gobs of dry and half-dry semen," [302]) actualizes the threat posed by Caliban in *The Tempest*, while his aggravating adoration of Gustad and singsong speeches recall Lear's Fool. As victim, however, Tehmul ultimately absorbs the tragic end that Shakespeare assigns to Cordelia when Roshan miraculously recovers from her sickness. Killed by stones flung by an angry mob, and transported, in Gustad's arms, away from the scene of his accident, Tehmul's death literalizes Lear's heartrending "O! you are men of stone" (5.3.256). Anticipating the plight of Om and Ishvar in *A Fine Balance*, the misfortunes of Tehmul offer an important insight into the reception and status of *King Lear* as a template for suffering.<sup>12</sup>

Yet Mistry's use of *King Lear* is not limited to domestic trials and individual suffering; the parallels that *Such a Long Journey* draws to *Lear* speak, as well, to the aftermath of Independence and Partition. *King Lear* opens with the king's announcement of his intention to "divest us both of rule, / Interest of territory, cares of state" (1.2.48-49) so that he may, like a Hindu *sannyasi*, "unburthen'd crawl toward death" (40). Placed within the context of Indian history, his intentions evoke not only Britain's withdrawal from India, but also the fall of the British Empire itself. The ensuing scenario, in which Lear divides "in three our kingdom" (36-37) and Goneril and Regan take over the reins of power from their father, leaving the honest Cordelia unrewarded and exiled, resonates with the historical backdrop of India's war with Pakistan (which eventually resulted in the formation of a third nation, Bangladesh) and with Indira Gandhi's inheritance of her father's mandate. Mistry describes Jawaharlal Nehru's decline during the Indo-Chinese war in decidedly Lear-like terms:

His one overwhelming obsession now was, how to ensure that his darling daughter Indira, the only one, he claimed, who loved him truly, who had even abandoned her worthless husband in order to be with her father — how to ensure that she would become Prime Minister after him. (Mistry 1991, 11)

Highlighting the unusually close bond of Nehru and Gandhi, Mistry recalls Goneril and Regan's professions that they love their father "dearer than eyesight" (*King Lear*, 1.2.56) and with "true heart" (70). Of course, Cordelia points out the double standard: "Why have my sisters husbands, if they say / They love you all?" (99-100). Thus, Mistry casts Nehru's relationship with the Chinese foreign minister Chou En-lai according to the model of Lear and Cordelia:

But everyone knew that the war with China froze Jawaharlal Nehru's heart, then broke it. He never recovered from what he perceived to be Chou En-lai's betrayal. The country's beloved Panditji, everyone's Chacha Nehru, the unflinching humanist, the great visionary, turned bitter and rancorous. From now on, he would brook no criticism, take no advice. (Mistry 1991, 10-11)

Similarly, Gandhi's dishonest policies recall the depravities of Lear's daughters, Goneril and Regan:

There was report after report of the citizen's generous support for the fighting men: about an eighty-year-old peasant who traveled to New Delhi, clutching her two gold wedding bangles, which she presented to Mother India for the war effort (some newspapers reported it as Mother Indira, which did not really matter — the line between the two was fast being blurred by the Prime Minister's far-sighted propagandists, who saw its value for future election campaigns). . . . Of course, in the newsreels, no mention was ever made of dutiful Shiv Sena patrols and motley fascists who roamed city streets with stones at the ready, patriotically shattering windows that they deemed inadequately blacked-out. Or the unlucky individuals mistaken for enemy agents and beaten up with great relish by personal enemies. (297-98)

Evoking Goneril and Regan's reign of terror, in which enemies such as Gloucester are abducted and beaten, this passage blurs the lines between the personal and the political, the familial and the national. The account of Shiv Sena patrols shattering "inadequately blacked-out" windows in this passage contributes to the prevailing set of images concerning darkness and light, blindness and insight, that tie *Such A Long Journey* to *King Lear*: Gustad, for example, preserves the blackout paper on his windows long after Nehru's war with China and refuses to see the unpleasant realities of Bilimoria's shady money-laundering scheme. And Dilnavaz, whose name means "light," sees how her husband finds "the darkness soothing after death's recent visitation" and encourages her family to grow "accustomed to living in less light" (11).

An Indian tale told with a Shakespearean plot in mind, *Such A Long Journey* situates the experience of a single family within ongoing national struggles, as India itself removes the traces

of Britain's paternalistic form of control. While Soviet, Japanese, and Yiddish treatments of *King Lear* (among others) attest to the applicability of the narrative to a variety of cultural and historical contexts, the play's handling of family trauma and the hardships of the disenfranchised provide a particularly useful pattern for exploring contemporary Indian history. The parallel dramatization of familial strife and territorial division in *King Lear* provides a frame of reference for late twentieth-century Indian politics, from Independence and Partition to Jawaharlal Nehru and Indira Gandhi, as the violent disputes, rivalries, and betrayals that take place within a national and international framework stem from a set of relationships between parents and children, spouses and siblings. While Mistry's insights into the problems faced by the Bombay Parsi community in the 1970s would resonate with any urban metropolis in transition, they speak directly to Canada, a country produced by the same kinds of territorial division and demographic dispersal that are charted in *King Lear*. They detail the political and cultural climate that makes characters such as Sarosh want to immigrate, outlining not only what is being left behind, but also what one would hope to find elsewhere. The novel acts, as well, as a reminder of the ubiquity of corruption and the fragility of peace: the latter, a blessing Canadians often take for granted. Most importantly, *Such A Long Journey* reminds us how other national histories become Canadian histories and are relevant to the Canadian experience. With the image of itself as a cultural "mosaic," Canada must embrace not only individuals, but also their background and baggage.

Mistry's *Family Matters* traces not only the last days of Mr. Kapur, the hapless shopkeeper, but also the journey toward death of Nariman Vakeel, a retired professor of English who is turned out of his house by his stepchildren. As Nariman laments to his grandson, named Jehangir (whose name recalls the title character in Umrao Ali's *Urdu Hamlet*):<sup>13</sup>

"To so many classes I taught *Lear*, learning nothing myself. What kind of teacher is that, as foolish at the end of his life as at the beginning?"

"What is *Lear*?" asked Jehangir.

Nariman swallowed the potato. "It's the name of a king who made many mistakes." (Mistry 2002, 190)

Nariman's conclusion: "So we tell the same story, over and over. Just the details are different" (197). While *Such A Long Journey* tells the same story with different details, it reveals how retelling a tale, both placing it a different context and relating from within a different context, can transform it profoundly, even turning a tragic ending to comic (in the divine sense). For an emigre writer such as Mistry, Shakespeare is not only a link to the past, but also a blueprint for the future.

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### Notes

1. All references to Shakespeare are to *The Riverside Shakespeare*, edited by G. Blakemore Evans et al, 2nd edition. All further references will be incorporated into the body of the text.
2. See *Shakespeare in Canada: A World Elsewhere?* (2002), Ric Knowles, *Shakespeare and Canada: Essays on Production, Translation, and Adaptation* (2004), and the Canadian Adaptations of Shakespeare Project, available online at <http://www.canadianshakespeares.ca>.
3. The repatriation of the Canadian Constitution did not occur until 1982. The late Pierre Trudeau's remarks at the 1982 Proclamation ceremony apply a metaphor of family relationships to the colonial situation: "For more than half a century, Canadians have resembled young adults who leave home to build a life of their own, but are not quite confident enough to take along all their belongings" (Trudeau 1982).
4. The entire poem reads as follows:

When far across the sea your fire dawned, World Poet,  
 England embraced you within her own horizon,  
 Assumed your riches were hers alone;  
 Kissed your radiant brow, but kept you entwined for a while  
 In the branchy arms of her woods; cloaked you in mist  
 In the flowery, grassy, dew-bright glades  
 Where her woodsprites danced. Her island groves  
 Did not at first rise up with hymns of praise  
 To a Sun Poet. But slowly, hour by hour, century by century,  
 Silently beckoned by Infinity, you left that horizon's lap,  
 Climbed to blazing high noon splendor,  
 Took your seat at the hub of all skies  
 To flood with light the mind of the whole world.  
 See then how, at the turn of an era,  
 On the shore of India, joy at your glory rings out now  
 Through the rippling, thickly fronded coconut-groves. (Tagore 1991)

5. See, in particular, Ania Loomba's excellent overview of the history of the Parsi Theater in "Shakespearean Transformations" (1997).



6. The myth of the Canadian cultural mosaic is the object of Mistry's satire, as well: the Multicultural Department of the Canadian government supports the invention of a device, Crappus Non Interruptus, designed "to ensure that ethnic cultures are able to flourish" (Mistry 1987, 160), for which Dr. No-Ilaaz of the Immigrant Aid Society offers the following gloss: "Ethnic is a polite way of saying bloody foreigner." However, CNI produces the now-classic postcolonial experience of "betweenness," preventing full assimilation, while, paradoxically, ensuring that the subject can never fully return home: "Once CNI is implanted, you can never pass a motion in the natural way — neither sitting nor squatting" (161).
7. Mistry here employs a passage from Shakespeare associated with a famous crux. Whereas the Quarto text reads "base Indian," some editors prefer the Folio reading, "base Judean," taken as an allusion to Judas or Herod the Great. In this context, the inconsistency underscores Sarosh's own identity confusion, while the term "base Indian" itself recalls the identity confusion between the old India and the new world "Indians" discovered instead of a Spice Route.
8. This scandal involved Sohrab Nagarwala, a retired Army captain who impersonated Indira Gandhi in a telephone call to the chief cashier of the State Bank of India, asking him to bring Rs 60 *lakhs* to him. After Indira's men denied the call for cash, Nagarwala was tried and, when he demanded a retrial, died suddenly under mysterious circumstances.
9. The poem forms part of Eliot's *Ariel* series, the title of which invokes *The Tempest* in a manner that resonates differently now, in the wake of a succession of postcolonial critiques and adaptations of the play, than it did at a time when Eliot was looking to Shakespearean romance for paradigms of spiritual regeneration.
10. Mistry presents this new kingdom through the eyes of "the old dispensation." The "wrinkled, old-woman dugs" of Peerbhoy Paanwalla, a "grizzled old man whose lips were perpetually reddened, doubtless from sampling his own wares," and who, from his vantage point outside the House of Cages brothel, "seemed more swami or guru than paanwalla" (Mistry 1991, 158), allude to Eliot's Tiresias, the "old man with wrinkled dugs" in *The Waste Land*, who, witnessing the typist's half-hearted affair, has "foresuffered all / Enacted on this same divan or bed" ("The Waste Land," in Eliot 1963, lines 228, 233-44, and 218). Like Eliot's Tiresias, Gustad Noble is "throbbing between two lives."
11. Echoing Lear's discovery of Cordelia's body, Roshan holds the doll in her arms, while she is, herself, held in her father's arms:

"Daddy! Daddy! I won the doll!"

He swept her up in his arms. "My doll has won a doll. But you are the prettier of the two, I am sure."

"No! That doll is much prettier, she has blue eyes, and fair skin, so pink, and a lovely white dress!"

"Blue eyes and pink skin? Chhee! Who wants that?" (Mistry 1991, 84)

12. Just as a childhood accident endows Tehmul with a child's mind and the body (and desires) of a man, so, too, does caste, an accident of birth, work alongside Indira Gandhi's forced sterilization program to prevent Om and Ishvar from enjoying the self-determining dignities of adulthood in *A Fine Balance*.

13. See Loomba 140, n. 30.

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