

## The Making of the Novelist: Rohinton Mistry

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Rohinton Mistry, Parsi Gujarati of Indian origin, who migrated to Canada at the age of twenty-three but returns to India for themes and subject matter in all his works, embodies the displaced subject of post modernity. Mistry's life and writing not only challenge all attempts to categorize but also highlight the futility of categories. He was born in Bombay, now resident in Canada, but continually raiding the cupboards of memory for the dusty but tangible remnants of the India he has left behind. He studied English Literature and Philosophy and got a second bachelor's degree in 1982. He wrote his first short-story, 'One Sunday' in 1983, when he was over thirty and it won him the Hart House Prize that year at the literary contest of the University of Toronto. The decision to enter this story for the Hart House Prize was prompted not just by the prospect of the cash prize it carried but also the fact that the winning entry would be bound in leather. Mistry won the Hart award two years running, the second time for "Lend me your Light", but in an ironic twist, worthy of his own narratives, he never got his winning stories bound in leather as the sponsors were facing a financial crunch.

This did not dampen his enthusiasm though and he went on to win more prizes. In 1985, "Auspicious Occasion" won the contributor's award of Canadian Fiction, where it was published. The slew of award resulted in multiple publishers showing an interest in publishing a collection of Mistry's short stories and in 1987 Penguin Canada published *Tales from Firozsha Baag*, set in a Parsi housing estate in Bombay, which was subsequently brought out in Britain and the USA under the title "Swimming Lessons" and other Stories from Firozsha Baag. This book was short-listed for the Canadian Governor General's Award.

Mistry's first novel appeared in 1991 and won a string of awards again. *Such a Long Journey*, considered a literary masterpiece by many -- Mistry had recounted a story of a dabbawala's rudeness with one of the main characters, Dinshawji. The novel revolves around a Parsi family in Bombay, was short-listed for the Booker Prize and for the Trillium Award. At the post awards luncheon in Toronto in December 1991, the grave and soft-spoken author dealt most patiently with long lines of admirers and told reporters that he had no special celebratory plans. It also won the Governor General's Award, the Smith Books/Books in Canada First Novel Award and the Commonwealth Writer's Prize for the Best book. In March 2000, it was adapted for film by Sooni Taraporevala, directed by Sturla Gunnarsson, starring Om Puri and Roshan Seth and released as a major motion picture. "Such a Long Journey" also had its share of controversy as the Bombay University was forced to withdraw the book from its curriculum after Shiv Sena protested over its alleged "anti-Marathi" content.

Mistry's second novel, *A Fine Balance*, came out in 1995 and was short-listed for Britain's most prestigious literary award, the Booker Prize. It is by far the author's most ambitious work to date. Rushdie-like in scope, Dickensian in approach, the novel is set chiefly in

an unnamed city by the sea (Bombay) in 1975-76, in the period leading up to and during the state of Emergency

His novel *Family Matters* came out in 2002 is brilliant. It manages to be warm and familiar, while -- for North American readers, at any rate -- fragrantly exotic. Like Mistry himself, the main character in *Family Matters* is a Parsi, members of a fringe religious community in India who follow the faith as laid down by the prophet Zoroaster. Though the story takes place in Bombay, many of the challenges the main characters face are universal, the resolutions they come to sharply and recognizably human and one does have to be a Parsi or Indian to identify with his characters and the dilemmas they face. This novel was short-listed for the Booker prize but once again missed it. This novel won James Tait Black Memorial Prize. Mistry was the Joint winner with Pascal Khoo Thwe for Kiriya Pacific Rim Book Prize for Family Matters. The novel was also shortlisted for Man Booker Prize of Fiction in 2002 and International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award in 2004.

His latest book is *The Scream*, was illustrated by Tony Urquhart, one of Canada's leading contemporary artists. This story is very small as a matter of a fact, all total only 48 pages. However, these pages contain such a deep story. The novel is set in Bombay and it tells us a single story of an old man at the end o Mistry writes with great passion, and his body of work shows the most compassionate and astute observations of the human condition, making him one of the most exciting and important contemporary novelists writing in the English language

Critically acclaimed Mistry has been selected as the winner of 2012Neustadt International Prize for Literature. "Mistry writes with great passion, and his body of work shows the most compassionate and astute observations of human condition, making him one of the most exciting and important contemporary novelist writing in the English Language," Samrat Upadhyay was quoted in his nominating statement for Mistry by "World Literature Today" The Neustadt Prize, awarded by University of Oklahoma and its international literary publication, "The World Literature Today," is widely considered to be the most prestigious international prize after the Nobel Prize in Literature.

As Rick Gekoski well said "Mistry has a great eye and a huge heart, and if the world he describes is often cruel and capricious, his characters have a remarkable capacity to survive."<sup>1</sup> Rohinton Mistry has made the literary choice to use English language to address the experience of the Indian Parsi. This experience located within a particular community is woven into a larger picture of India itself, and further, into the map of universal humanity. The subject of his writing is the Parsi enclave in multicultural India. Through its depiction of Indian Parsis, his fiction is also in the process of redefining the liminalities of nationhood, and pushing the boundaries in the representation of the nation. Because of the specific location of his position as a writer within the tapestry of Indian fiction and as a Parsi — inheritor of and witness to their complicated process of adaptation and immigration over time —Mistry introduces the space for another definition that refuses the simple categorization of mainstream writing. Mistry subverts the existing categories of the national imaginary by placing the narrative perspective within the Parsi community in his all works. In doing so, the whole nation is re-imagined from a new perspective, that of the multi-faceted subaltern within the nation state.

Mistry's fiction is ethnocentric, and they depict the idiosyncrasies of the Parsi community in Bombay. Mistry refers to the Parsis's sense of religious superiority complex when he exposes a common belief among the rigid Parsi traditionalists in the words, "Parsi prayers are so powerful only a Parsi can listen to them. Everyone else can be badly damaged inside their soul if they listen."<sup>2</sup> Mistry uses the narrative technique of memory and remembering. As Nilufer Bharucha says that these stories could be termed as 'Nostalgia Writing'. However, in an Interview with Ali Lakhani, Mistry remarks that, "Nostalgia is interesting as an emotion, but for a writer to write out of a feeling of nostalgia is debilitating because it makes the writing too sentimental."<sup>3</sup>

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Mistry's work exhibits a preoccupation with the multiple histories of the nation. He seeks to redefine the role of the Parsi (and, by extension, other minorities) in the context of the Indian nation. Is the Parsi an 'Other' that will not and cannot be assimilated within Indian modernity? Is synthesis possible at all? And how is a nation's history to be written? Mistry suggests that a universal humanity must inform the complex negotiation of the 'self' and the 'Other'. Compassion and a sense of humanism must override a politics that seeks only to denigrate, corrupt and destroy the 'Other' through varied fundamentalism and rejection. He articulates the need for rediscovery of faith, accompanied by a critical stance towards inherited belief systems and a rejection of intolerant traditions. That which, above all, strikes any reader is Mistry's distrust of politics.

Mistry deals with ethnicity, religious rituals and customs of Parsi community in his fictions. Parsis are alienated from the majority and downgraded from the position of dominant community in postcolonial India. In the colonial period, Parsis were close to the Britishers and enjoyed a privileged status under their Raj. But in the postcolonial India, they suffered a lot and this is shown in his short stories collection through the Parsis living in Firozsha Baag.

In an interview with Geoff Hancock, Mistry states that his purpose of writing is neither for an audience nor with a message in mind, he writes for the record of the distinct identity of a small group of people to which he belongs. He claims, "Politics and religion come in a second way."<sup>4</sup>

Thus as a born Zoroastrian, Mistry's fictional discourse reflects his concern for the existence of his community. His novels deal with the heterogeneity of identity within Parsi community and the dynamic nature of Parsi community itself. Mistry's fictional world offers very few 'success', in the sense that there are no rags-to-riches stories here. Most of his

characters appear claustrophobic, trapped within the cloister of their unfulfilled dreams, residing in caverns whose walls are decorated with images of hope and prosperity. His characters aim at bare survival and the immediate gratification of dire needs. Mistry is the speleologist who explores their caves of dreams and despair, and comes up with some answers.

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