Rohinton Mistry

**E-Book**

**Birth:** 1952 in Bombay, India  
**Nationality:** Canadian  
**Occupation:** Writer, Novelist  
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### BIOGRAPHICAL ESSAY

Rohinton Mistry's small body of fiction has received high praise, numerous honors, and been favorably, if inevitably, compared to the work of the best known and most respected contemporary Indian writers. Much of his achievement derives from the seamless way in which he has fashioned a decidedly personal style from a variety of literary precursors (Euro-American as well as Indian: Joyce, Cheever, Malamud, and Bellow most notably) perfectly suited to his Indian subject matter. Although his style lacks Rushdie's postmodern brilliance, it deftly avoids Mukherjee's melodramatic excesses and Naipaul's air of critical detachment while successfully adapting Narayan's studied naivete to more modern urban as well as immigrant experience. Mistry's achievement also derives from his willingness to devote himself to those aspects of his subject that he knows best and that most of his Western readers know not at all: the small Parsi community, both in Bombay and in Toronto.

Mistry's is an art of the bittersweet about a world more sad than tragic, where frustrations rather than defeats are the general rule. It is an art gently ironic in its depiction of the everyday lives of mainly middle-class Parsi characters either living in apartment complexes in Bombay or struggling to adapt to immigrant life in Canada. The religious strife that figures prominently in much writing about India serves as backdrop for the more pressing quotidian problems faced by Mistry's characters: straitened finances, the effect of modern ways on cultural traditions (particularly as manifested in generational conflict), ambivalence regarding immigration, and the consequences of sexual repression—all compounded by life's little inconveniences: shoddy goods, petty neighbors, government corruption, and the like. The eleven stories included in *Swimming Lessons* concern the interconnected lives of the residents of Forozsha Baag, with its "surfeit of bank clerks and bookkeepers" leavened by the occasional professor, lawyer, or chartered accountant. In these stories spanning about a decade, people grow old, spouses die, and children emigrate only to exchange the constrictiveness of home life for a new set of anxieties. The title story brings together the two worlds and generations in an especially effective manner, shuttling between two cities, two typefaces, and two sensibilities. In writing a book of stories not unlike *Swimming Lessons*, the son comes to understand the world he has left behind; in reading that book his parents come in turn to understand the son whom they feared was growing not just geographically distant but culturally distant as well.

Such a Long Journey is at once a more narrowly focused fiction (having a single protagonist and center of

consciousness) and, in its depiction of life in modern India, more wide-ranging (even if temporally more circumscribed). The novel is set in 1971, during the time of Pakistan's brutal but (as the result of Indian intervention) unsuccessful attempt to suppress the uprising in its eastern wing, the future Bangladesh, and against the backdrop of India's 1965 war with Pakistan over Kashmir and the 1962 defeat by the Chinese army. It deals more specifically with Gustad Noble in his various roles: husband, father, bank clerk, resident in the block of flats called the Khodadad Building. At once petty and heroic (in a decidedly minor, middle-class key), Noble struggles on various fronts: with the threat of war, his youngest daughter's persistent illness, his wife's superstitious beliefs, his son's preferring to pursue a worthless liberal arts degree rather than study engineering, and the decline of the family's fortunes (from the bankruptcy of his grandfather's furniture business to his father's "despoiled" bookstore to Gustad's ignoble position at the bank). There are the surly bus conductors, rising prices resulting from the Refugee Relief Tax, and passersby who relieve themselves on the wall surrounding his apartment block, a wall the municipal government wants to raze in order to widen the road, and thus deprive Gustad of the little space he has to breathe the already fetid air. And there are the deaths of the building's retarded caretaker whom Gustad must himself take care of, a coworker whose antics both amuse and irritate, and the former friend and neighbor, Major Jimmy Bilimoria, whose mysterious letter makes Gustad an accomplice in crime even as it exposes him to corruption in government that leads all the way to the prime minister herself. Caught between resignation and resistance, Gustad is an essentially good man doing the best he can in troubling times and under difficult circumstances. Within his unassuming public self, one finds a depth of quiet heroism that corresponds to those moments of elegiac lyricism that arise from Mistry's artfully artless prose.

Like Such a Long Journey, Mistry's second novel, A Fine Balance, 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 that Prime Minister Indira Gandhi declared to avoid being cast out of office and to crack down on her political opponents under cover of protecting the nation. Against that backdrop, Mistry tells the three intertwined stories of his four main characters, weaving them together with numerous others. Dina Dalal is a widow struggling to make ends meet (by making clothes on consignment) while avoiding being evicted from her home by her greedy landlord. Maneck Kohlah, who illegally rents a room from her, is a student unwilling to resign himself to taking over his father's shop. Ishvan and his nephew Omprakash work in Dina's home as tailors, having left the confines of a village ruled by the caste system (they belonged to the cobbler caste) and wealthy landlords. The city they find "so huge and so confusing" is for Mistry "a story factory," "a modern Mahabharat." His novel is in effect an epic of physical violence and economic exploitation, in which the desire to succeed is reduced to the struggle merely to survive and in which individual, random destruction is the reflection of, and is dwarfed by, the violence of a corrupt government promoting sterilization programs and euphemistic Beautification Projects that sweep beggars off the streets and into labor camps. It is a world in which even good intentions (the Rent Act) quickly go awry, leaving those it was designed to protect no better off than before. In such a world, and such a novel, Mistry invariably sides with "the ones who are weak and without influence," which is to say with everyone of narrative importance in a novel that wears its sympathies on its sleeve yet manages to avoid becoming unconvincingly sentimental. Although not one of these characters will succeed, some not even survive, Mistry nonetheless strikes in the novel and in his readers "a fine balance between hope and despair" that is characteristic of his work in general.

UPDATES


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