Title: Rohinton Mistry
Author(s): Martin Genetsch (University of Trier.)

Document Type: Biography

Full Text: COPYRIGHT 2007 Gale, Cengage Learning

Table of Contents: Biographical and Critical Essay
Tales from Firozsha Baag
Such a Long Journey
A Fine Balance
Family Matters
Writings by the Author
Further Readings about the Author

Most of Rohinton Mistry's fiction is set in the Parsi community of his native Bombay (today Mumbai), India. Concentrating on the individual's struggle to make life meaningful, his work is grounded in a liberal-humanist frame of reference and emphasizes solidarity, tolerance, and understanding. Mistry's works have won many prestigious awards and have been translated into many languages. He is a major voice on the contemporary Canadian literary scene.

Of Parsi descent, Mistry was born in Bombay on 3 July 1952 to Behram Mistry, who worked for an advertising agency, and Freny Mistry, née Jhaveri. He was the second of three brothers, the youngest of whom, Cyrus, also became a writer; he also has a younger sister. He attended the Villa Theresa Primary School and St. Xavier High School. He watched the movies of Satyajit Ray and listened to the music of Ravi Shankar, but he also grew up with Enid Blyton's mystery and adventure novels and Captain W. E. Johns's Biggles books, enjoyed British theater and movies, and listened to American music. He learned to play the guitar at fourteen and later taught himself to play the harmonica, and he was a member of a folk-rock band that played the songs of Bob Dylan, Leonard Cohen, and Paul Simon and Art Garfunkel. Although Mistry is fluent in Hindi and Gujarati, he is most comfortable with English.

After completing a bachelor of science in economics and mathematics at St. Xavier's College of the University of Bombay in 1975, Mistry joined his fiancée, Freny Elavia, in Toronto, where she had been staying with relatives for a year. They had met at a music school in 1971 and had both attended Bombay University. Mistry became a Canadian citizen and married Elavia in 1975. Freny Mistry earned a B.A. in 1981 and a B.Ed. in 1982 from the University of Toronto and became a teacher at a high school in Brampton. The couple has no children.

Rohinton took a job as a clerk at the Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce. After working for several years in the accounting department, he was made supervisor of customer services. After taking some classes at York University, in 1978 Mistry began studying literature and philosophy part-time at the University of Toronto. Around 1982 he began to write after working hours. He received his B.A. in 1983. That same year his story "One Sunday" won the $250 Hart House Literary Prize.

In 1984 Mistry's story "Auspicious Occasion" won another Hart House Literary Prize. Mavis Gallant, who at that...
time was writer-in-residence at the University of Toronto, was on the jury; she encouraged Mistry to continue writing and pointed him out to John Metcalf and Leon Rooke, who were putting together an anthology of new Canadian writing. A Canada Council grant enabled him to give up his job at the bank in 1985 and commit himself to writing full-time. That same year he won the Canadian Fiction Magazine Annual Contributor’s Award.

In 1986 Mistry accompanied his wife to Long Beach, California, where she had been offered a teaching position at a high school. In a 1989 interview with Geoff Hancock, Mistry said: "The killings and shootings we saw took place outside school property, but close enough to be frightening. One night, after a basketball game, a student was gunned down right outside that elaborate twenty-foot fence. Two other students on a long weekend were walking in the school neighbourhood and were shot from a passing car. That was the American experience for us." Comparing the United States and Canada, Mistry told Hancock: "I think I prefer Multiculturalism to the direct racism of the Melting Pot because I’d rather be alive and face the subtle discrimination. The overt racism of the Melting Pot often leads to a violent end."

The Mistrys returned to Canada in 1987; Rohinton Mistry’s first book, Tales from Firozsha Baag, appeared that same year. In addition to “One Sunday” and “Auspicious Occasion,” the volume includes the stories ”The Ghost of Firozsha Baag,” ”Condolence Visit,” ”The Collectors,” ”Of White Hairs and Cricket,” ”The Paying Guests,” ”Squatter,” ”Lend Me Your Light,” ”Exercisers,” and ”Swimming Lessons.” The three that have attracted the most critical attention concern young Parsis who leave the Firozsha Baag apartment building in Bombay and immigrate to Canada or the United States. In ”Squatter” Sarosh moves to Toronto, setting himself the goal of becoming a Canadian in ten years. On arrival he renames himself Sid, but he discovers that he is unable to use a toilet in the Western way: "Morning after morning, he had no choice but to climb up and simulate the squat of our Indian latrines. If he sat down, no amount of exertion could produce success." He considers the surgical implantation of the ”Crapus Non Interruptus (CNI),” a device that enables one to empty one's bowels immediately by pressing a button. In the end he accomplishes the feat of sitting on a toilet without the help of the CNI; but he is able to do so only when he is on a flight to India and is, therefore, no longer on Canadian territory. He will remain a double entity, half Sarosh and half Sid, alienated from the old without being able to adapt to the new. In ”Lend Me Your Light” the well-to-do Jamshed immigrates to the United States; the middle-class Kersi opts for Canada; and Kersi’s brother Percy remains in India and commits himself to working for the underprivileged. Kersi reflects guiltily: ”There you were, my brother, waging battles against corruption and evil, while I was watching sitcoms on my rented Granada TV.” Kersi returns in the last story in the volume, ”Swimming Lessons.” He has now been living in Toronto for a year, but Bombay is constantly on his mind. While on the surface the story concerns Kersi’s attempt to learn to swim, Gregory McElwain explains that ”swimming is a metaphor for assimilating in the story, and his fear of the water and lack of effort in the lessons symbolize his inability to commit to Canada.” Only when he explores his Indian past through art is Kersi able to come to terms with his country of adoption. Tales from Firozsha Baag was short-listed for the Governor General’s Literary Award for Fiction in 1988.

The Parsis in Mistry’s first novel, Such a Long Journey (1991), are concerned about the rise of the Shiv Sena, a radical right-wing party with considerable influence in the Bombay area. Shiv Sena’s agitation for a national Hindu identity threatens the self-image of the Parsis, who were an elite in colonial times. Dinshawji, a friend of the protagonist, Gustad Noble, is confused by the changing of the names of Bombay streets from English to the local Marathi language. The Parsis live in the Khodadad Building; the wall surrounding the building is threatened by the municipality’s road-widening scheme, as well as by ”urinators and defecators” who use it as a public toilet. The loss of the wall will leave the Zoroastrian minority in an exposed position. According to Nilufer E. Bharucha, the ”protecting/imprisoning wall” is symbolic of the siege mentality of the Parsi community in postcolonial times; David Williams notes that the wall preserves ”the Parsi in his self-sameness and hierarchical privilege” and protects ”him from the threat of difference, of Otherness itself.” Gustad must also contend with the protracted illness of his daughter, Roshan; the waywardness of his youngest son, Darius; and the refusal of his eldest son, Sohrab, to attend a prestigious university. In addition, he becomes involved in a national scandal when he helps his old friend Jimmy Biliomia, who once saved his life after he was injured in a traffic accident, hide a large sum of money; Dinshawji risks his job for Gustad by opening a bank account to launder Jimmy’s illegal money. At the end of the
novel the child-like, retarded Tehmul, who has been like a son to Gustad, is fatally injured; Gustad carries Tehmul in the same way Jimmy carried him after the accident. Gordon Ekelund finds that Mistry's first novel invites the reader to "discover shared values and a common humanity," while Barbara Leckie points out that "Mistry promotes a universal paradigm with respect to moral ideas." *Such a Long Journey* won the Governor General's Literary Award for Fiction in 1991 and the Trillium Award, the Commonwealth Writers Prize, and the Smith Books/Books in Canada Award for best first novel in 1992. It was a finalist for the 1991 Booker Prize in the United Kingdom and was made into a movie in 1998.

Part of Mistry's second novel, *A Fine Balance* (1995), is set at the time of India's independence from British rule in 1947; the bulk of it takes place during the 1975 to 1977 emergency declared by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in an unnamed "city by the sea" that resembles Bombay. Two of the four protagonists, Maneck Kohlih and Dina Shroff, are Parsis; Ishvar Darji and his nephew, Omprakash (Om) Darji, are Hindus. Maneck comes from a rural background in the north of India; Dina was born into an upper-middle-class family in the city; the tailors Ishvar and Om belong to the Chamaar caste of untouchables. In a 1996 interview Mistry told Paul Wilson: "In the first two books, my setting was one community, one narrow focus in a city, one apartment building, one neighbourhood, and even when we go outside it is still through the eyes of that one community. In *A Fine Balance* I wanted to deal with more of India, not just urban life." In the wake of independence Maneck's father, Farokh, is forced to give up his farm and is left with only a small shop; Ishvar and his brother Narayan are apprenticed to the Muslim tailor Ashraf Chacha; and the death of their father leaves Dina to face the domestic tyranny of her brother, Nusswan. In the 1970s Dina owns a textile factory that employs Ishvar and Om, and Maneck is Dina's lodger. During the emergency, Ashraf is killed in a police action; Maneck's friend Avinash, a student leader, is tortured to death because of his criticism of the prime minister's policy; and Om is castrated as a part of a mass-sterilization program. Narayan's death leaves Ishvar responsible for Om, Narayan's only surviving child. The employer-employee relationship between Dina, who has lost her father and her husband, and the tailors, who have lost their entire family, is replaced by friendship; and Maneck, who has lost his father and his home, finds a new family with the three of them. Maneck, Dina, Ishvar, and Om make sense of their lives through storytelling. The proofreader Vasantrao Valmiki, a minor character whose last name echoes that of Valmiki, the poet to whom the Sanskrit epic *Ramayana* is ascribed, theorizes: "Perhaps the very act of telling created a natural design. Perhaps it was a knack that humans had, for cleaning up their untidy existences--a hidden survival weapon, like antibodies in the bloodstream." *A Fine Balance* won the 1995 Giller Prize, the 1995 Royal Society of Literature's Winifred Holtby Memorial Prize, the 1995 Canada-Australia Literary Prize, the 1996 *Los Angeles Times* Book Award for fiction, and the 1996 Commonwealth Writers Prize. It also received a prize from the Danish Literacy Council and was shortlisted for the 1996 Booker Prize and the IMPAC Dublin Literary Award. Mistry received an honorary doctorate from the University of Ottawa in 1996. In autumn 2001 *A Fine Balance* became the first Canadian work--and only the second non-American book after Bernhard Schlink's *Der Vorleser* (1995; translated as *The Reader*, 1997)--to be chosen by the influential talk-show host Oprah Winfrey for her book club. A best-seller in Canada and the United States, the novel has been translated into many major languages, including German, Japanese, Swedish, Norwegian, and Danish.

Mistry's third novel, *Family Matters*, appeared in spring 2002. Yezad and Roxana and their sons, Murad and Jehangir, live in a tiny apartment. Yezad works in a sporting-goods store owned by the kindly Vikram Kapur, who, in spite of having suffered from Muslim aggression during the 1947 partition of the subcontinent into India and Pakistan, provides Husain, a traumatized Muslim victim of Hindu violence, with a job at the store. Vikram says to Husain: "You see how we two are sitting here, sharing? That's how people have lived in Bombay. That's why Bombay has survived floods, disease, plague, water shortage, bursting drains and sewers, all the population pressures." The lives of Yezad and Roxana are radically changed when they take in Roxana's father, Nariman Vakeel, a seventy-nine-year-old former professor of English literature who suffers from Parkinson's disease and a broken ankle, after he is cast out by his stepchildren, Coooy and Jal. To try to meet the additional expense that the care of Roxana's father entails, Yezad bets all of his money on the Indian Matka lottery but loses. He then attempts to extort money from Vikram Kapur by having friends pose as gangsters; but the plan fails when Vikram dies. The stress of his situation finally drives Yezad to identify completely with Zoroastrianism, from which he has hitherto
been alienated, and become a religious bigot. *Family Matters* was short-listed for the 2002 Booker Prize.

Although he has published only four books, Rohinton Mistry is one of the most widely acclaimed Canadian writers. His analyses of Indian society and the Parsi community offer insights into history, politics, and life in general. As Singh points out, Mistry's books "take a full measure of the human experience—a domain no less worthy of a new Canadian writer than of a Dickens or a George Eliot."

WORKS:

WRITINGS BY THE AUTHOR:

BOOKS


PRODUCED SCRIPT


SELECTED PERIODICAL PUBLICATIONS--UNCOLLECTED


FURTHER READINGS:

FURTHER READINGS ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Interviews:

- Stacey Gibson, "Such a Long Journey: From Bank Clerk to Writer, from Obscurity to the Oprah Winfrey Show, Rohinton Mistry's Path as a Writer Has Taken a Series of Unlikely Turns," *University of Toronto Magazine* (Summer 2002).
References:

- Dan Coleman, Masculine Migrations: Reading the Postcolonial Male in "New Canadian" Narratives (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990), pp. 131-158.


Gale Document Number: GALE|H1200013284