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## **MUKUL KESAVAN (1957 - )**

Mukul Kesavan is a historian, novelist and essayist. He studied history at St. Stephen's College and at the University of Delhi. He then gained an MLitt degree at Trinity Hall, Cambridge, England. Kesavan teaches history at Jamia Millia Islamia University in Delhi.

Kesavan's first and only novel to date, *Looking Through Glass*, was published in 1995. The novel re-examines the official history of the period from the 1942 Quit India movement to Independence and Partition, posing questions about nationalist agency. The novel focuses especially on the history of the Muslim population and their participation in and absence from the nationalist struggle. Most notably, the role and place of Muslim Congress-supporters are foregrounded in the face of Gandhi's major civil disobedience campaign before the Hindu-Muslim conflict has been resolved. Kesavan makes use of some magic realist devices in making some major points in the novel. One of them is the literal disappearance of those Indian Muslims who oppose Partition on the morning the Quit India program is announced.

Magic realism is also utilised to frame the narrative of *Looking Through Glass* and introduce its perspective: to examine and narrate history is always "looking through glass", a mediated view with possible distortions. While taking his grandmother's ashes to Banaras, the photographer protagonist-narrator is transported back in history to August 1942 when he falls from a railway bridge near Lucknow into the river below while trying to take a photograph. To cope with the time-travel and his new circumstances, he pretends to develop amnesia and finds a place to stay at the home of the young man, Masroor, who saved him from drowning, and his family, Ammi and Ashrafi. After Masroor, who is against the Quit India movement, disappears, the nameless narrator takes part in the rebellion and a raid on a police station.

In another narrative strand of the novel, the nameless narrator is recuperating in a wrestling academy in Banaras from the head wound he sustained in the attack. In Banaras, he becomes

involved in performances of gendered myths of the nation, including the masculine body-building *akhara* culture, the *Kama Sutra*, the Ramlila and especially the role of Sita, which the narrator is supposed to play, and (a cinematic rendition of) sati. The narrator rescues the actress Parwana, who is raped on the set of a film version of *Kama Sutra*. The narrator mistakenly believes that Parwana, who is unable to speak, is a widow and the scars on her back from her husband's funeral pyre. Although he later finds out the truth – Parwana has been injured on the sati set of a previous film – the narrator takes her to his social-worker grandmother, still alive and living in Delhi in 1942. Parwana has been muted by these versions of male nationalist myths, sati and *Kama Sutra*, and finds her voice only once in the old zenana of Ammi and Asharfi.

*Looking Through Glass* received favorable reviews but not quite the attention and publicity as some other Indian English novels of the 1990s.

In his collection of essays, *Secular Common Sense* (2001), published as the first book in the series *Interrogating India* by Penguin, Kesavan argues that “secularism is not a radical cause”, it has been “the political common sense of the Republic” and should remain as such. Kesavan traces the history of the Congress policy of secularism, understood in India as “an equal pandering to all religions” rather than the Western meaning of being unrelated or neutral in regards to religion, and discusses the adoption of the idea and practice of the new republic. The majority of the book focuses on Hindu chauvinism and the Hindu Right's attempt to replace State secularism with Hinduism, which in his view should be opposed.

Kesavan writes frequently about cricket and a collection of his essays, infused with history and memories, *Men in White: A Book of Cricket*, was published in 2007. He has also published two other edited collections of his essays on political and cultural subjects and travel, *The Ugliness of the Indian Male and Other Propositions* (2008) and *Homeless on Google Earth* (2013).

## Further Reading

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