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Rohinton Mistry (1952-)

Rohinton Mistry was born in Bombay on 3 July 1952, to a Parsi family. He attended the Jesuit-run St. Xavier High School and received a Bachelor's degree in Mathematics and Economics from St. Xavier's College, University of Bombay, in 1974. Mistry migrated to Toronto in July 1975, where he joined his future wife Freny Elavia, who had moved to Canada the previous year. Mistry worked as a clerk in the Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce but began studying English and philosophy part-time at the University of Toronto in 1978, where he completed his second Bachelor's degree in 1982. Mistry started writing short stories after a few years in Canada. When he won two Hart House literary prizes for stories which were published in the *Hart House Review*, and *Canadian Fiction Magazine's* annual Contributor's Prize in 1985, he quit his job in the bank and started writing full-time. He continues to live in Canada.

Mistry has set all his stories in India, with the exception of one short story, "Swimming Lessons", whose narrator is based in Toronto, and the Parsi community has been central in all his writing. Mistry's first published book was a collection of eleven short stories titled *Tales from Firozsha Baag* (1987), published in the US as *Swimming Lessons and Other Stories from Firozsha Baag* (1989). The intersecting stories focus on the lives of the residents of Firozsha Baag, an apartment building in Bombay housing mainly Parsis.

Mistry's first novel, *Such a Long Journey* (1991), is set in 1971, during the Bangladesh War of Liberation and the subsequent Indo-Pakistani War, which cast a shadow on the lives of the protagonists, even though they are not directly involved. The events mainly take place in Bombay as the story focuses on the middle-aged Parsi man Gustad Noble and his family – wife Dilnavaz, sons Sohrab and Darius and daughter Roshan. A central storyline of the novel is based on the infamous Nagarwala case. A Parsi man, Captain Rustom Sohrab Nagarwala, impersonating on the phone the voice of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, embezzled six million rupees from the State Bank of India in May 1971. Nagarwala was arrested and imprisoned but Indira Gandhi's role in the events remained

a mystery and cause for much speculation. This mystery and Indira Gandhi's abuse of power are examined in *Such a Long Journey*. Gustad becomes involved in this scam through his friend and former neighbour Major Jimmy Bilimoria, the novel's equivalent for Nagarwala. When Gustad visits his imprisoned friend in Delhi, the unwell and almost delirious Jimmy discloses Indira Gandhi's involvement in the case. The Bilimoria case becomes a central metaphor for government corruption and crimes.

The other central narrative strands of *Such a Long Journey* revolve around the bodies, bodily functions and (ill) health of the residents of the residential compound, the Khodadad building, especially on the mysterious illness of Gustad's young daughter Roshan and a disabled man, Tehmul, living alone in his flat. When medicine does not seem to be able to do the trick, Dilnavaz and her neighbour Miss Kutpitia attempt to cure Roshan by casting spells involving the simple-minded Tehmul as a substitute sufferer. The attempt to control the uncontrollable body ends in tragedy.

Mistry's second novel, *A Fine Balance* (1995), continues the examination of the political atmosphere and Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's rule in India in the 1970s. *A Fine Balance* is for the most part set in a city by the sea (Bombay) in the time of the Emergency (1975-77). Having concentrated on the Parsi community in his previous writing, Mistry made a conscious decision to include central characters also from other communities and geographical settings, wanting to capture especially some of the social reality of Indian villages. In addition to two Parsi characters, the middle-aged widow Dina Dalal and Maneck Kohlah, a university student, the main protagonists of *A Fine Balance* include two Dalit characters, Ishvar and Omprakash Narayan. Maneck's home is in a town in the Himalayas, where his family's livelihood of making locally popular cola is threatened by competition from multinational companies. In the city, Maneck's experiences at the university prove traumatic, not least because his new friend, a student leader and activist Avinash, is tortured and killed during the Emergency.

Dina tries to keep her independence and avoid moving in her brother's house by taking in Maneck as her lodger and by hiring two tailors to work on her behalf for an export company, as her own deteriorating eyesight makes embroidering impossible. The two tailors, Ishvar and Omprakash, an uncle and nephew, have learnt the trade of tailoring to break the centuries-long oppression of the Chamaar caste of tanners and leather-workers by Brahmins and other high castes in their home village. When factory-made garments reduce their work prospects, they move to the city, where they face many hardships from losing their home, when their slum is bulldozed in a "city beautification" campaign, to being picked up from a pavement to perform forced labour at an irrigation project. Their final downfall takes place after a forced vasectomy and, in Om's case, castration. As in *Such a Long Journey*, bodies, bodily processes, illness and disabilities have a central place in the narrative alongside the examination of government oppression and Emergency excesses.

Family Matters (2002), Mistry's third novel, features a Parsi family living in Bombay in the mid-1990s. The seventy-nine-year-old Parsi widower Nariman Vakeel, beset by Parkinson's disease, breaks his ankle and needs physical care. His two middle-aged step-children, Coomy and Jal, with whom he has lived, are unwilling to take care of him, and Nariman is forced to move in with his daughter Roxana. Roxana shares her small apartment with her husband Yezad and their two young sons. Nariman's need for more care and him taking up residence at Roxana's changes the lives of the three generations. *Family Matters*, as the novel's name implies, is a domestic drama filled with a range of emotions from sibling rivalry and jealousy to compassion and lost love. As in Mistry's two earlier novels, the body as well as (Mumbai) politics, especially Hindu nationalism and Shiv Sena, are also central to the plot. Mistry's latest published book, the novella *The Scream* (2008), follows in the direction set by *Family Matters*. *The Scream* is narrated by an old man in a Bombay apartment, raving and ranting about the predicament of old age.

Although some commentators have criticised Mistry's novels for being stuck in the past as they are largely set in the Bombay of Mistry's childhood and youth, all his works have been critically well received. All three of his novels have been shortlisted for the Booker prize. Furthermore, *Such a Long*

Journey won the Governor-General's Award of Canada and the Commonwealth Writers' Prize, *A Fine Balance* won the Commonwealth Writers' Prize and *Family Matters* won the Kiriya Pacific Rim Book Prize and the Canadian Authors Association Fiction Award.

Further reading

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