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Seeking and Maintaining Balance: Rohinton Mistry's Fiction

By ROBERT L. ROSS The title of Rohinton Mistry's second novel, *A Fine Balance*, suggests a worthwhile way to explore his fiction. Even Mistry's biography constitutes a kind of balancing act. Born in India in 1952, he grew up in Bombay and received a degree from the University of Bombay in mathematics and economics. In 1975 he immigrated to Canada, working in a bank to support himself while studying English and philosophy at the University of Toronto, where he received a second bachelor's degree in 1984. Although an immigrant, an outsider in Canadian society, Mistry already understood this condition, for in India he belonged to the Parsi community, whose Zoroastrian religious beliefs set its members on the edge of Hindu society. After a few years in Canada, he started writing stories and gained immediate attention, receiving two Hart House literary prizes and *Canadian Fiction Magazine's* annual Contributors' Prize in 1985. Two years later, Penguin Books Canada published a collection of eleven stories titled *Tales from Firozsha Baag*, which appeared in 1989 in the United States as *Swimming Lessons and Other Stories from Firozsha Baag*. Most of the stories had little to do with his experience as an immigrant in Canada, but focused instead on the uneventful lives of a group of Parsis who live in a ramshackle Bombay apartment block.

While some readers interpreted the collection's final story, "Swimming Lessons," as a forerunner to future fiction about the immigrant experience, their expectations fell short when Mistry's first novel, *Such a Long Journey*, appeared in 1991. This complex tale of corruption during Indira Gandhi's years in office returns once more to the Bombay Parsi community. For a debut novel, it brought the author rare attention, first as a winner of the Governor-General's Award of Canada and the Commonwealth Writers Prize, then as an entry on the shortlist for the Booker Prize. He published his second novel, *A Fine Balance*, in 1995. It again reached the shortlist for the Booker Prize and received various awards. Like its predecessor, *A Fine Balance* treats India both kindly and harshly. Set in the

mid-1970s during Mrs. Gandhi's declaration of a state of internal emergency, the book turns first toward the Parsi community in an unidentified city by the sea that resembles Bombay, but its plot opens up to embrace other characters and to expand the settings.

Mistry as a writer has enjoyed an exceptional start. When he was asked by Geoff Hancock in 1989 how he reacted to reviews, he replied: "In all modesty, I must admit that so far, I have only received positive reviews. I haven't felt the sting of a bad review" (147). That phenomenon still holds generally true. Hancock continues to stress how well Mistry has done in such a short time and proposes, "Is writing a gift you have?" Mistry counters the question by asking "Is it a gift? Or a fortuitous confluence of events? Is it because Multiculturalism is fashionable?" (146). Asked about his "sense of audience," Mistry responds rather grandly, "I suppose the world is my audience," then qualifies the claim by adding "At least, I wish it" (146). To a degree, the English-speaking world has become his audience, even though the wide reception of Mistry's fiction set in the milieu of a minority religious community and focused on Indian political events does raise some questions.

First, are Western readers just plain curious about the Parsis? After all, they are probably most widely known for a single practice: the way they dispose of their dead by leaving them in a tower for vultures to feast on. This ceremony receives full attention in *Such a Long Journey*, which presents all the gruesome details along with the ritualistic. As far as Parsi life goes, though, Mistry has some competition, because the Pakistani writer Bapsi Sidhwa, now a United States citizen, has written a robust novel that portrays this community during the colonial period, *The Crow Eaters* (1980), another that depicts a Parsi family in Lahore during the time of Partition in 1947, *Cracking India* (1991), and a third set in the postcolonial era, *An American Brat* (1993), that treats not only contemporary Parsi life in Pakistan but the community's immigrant experience in the United States as well. Although Sidhwa has received her share of attention, it has been far overshadowed by that accorded to Mistry. His meteoric career cannot then be credited altogether to the exotic nature of the Parsis. Instead, he has turned their lives into a metaphor that stands for the human experience: the fears, the joys, the ambitions and failures, the terror and the conflicts, finally the sense of balance that once attained will allow the

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characters to withstand the outer world, a world awash with dangers to personal fulfillment and identity.

Another question arises when considering the two novels: does the exposé of political corruption and tyranny during Indira Gandhi's tenure still hold that much interest? She is long dead, assassinated, and her sons are dead as well. Only the Italian-born daughter-in-law remains to carry on the dynasty. The tempest that is Indian politics before, during, and since Mrs. Gandhi's years in power probably fails to intrigue most readers of Mistry's work. It is not the history or the actuality that attracts in Mistry's fiction, but the way he uses these elements. As in his treatment of Parsi society, he transforms the historical situations and the reality of Indian life into a metaphor that shows how the individual reacts to widespread corruption when entangled in its grasp, as in *Such a Long Journey*, and how people respond to the endless forms of tyranny that government and society inflict, as in *A Fine Balance*.

But why does Mistry depend on India as a metaphor when he has lived in Canada for nearly twenty-five years? Bharati Mukherjee has declared the Asian immigration story as her preference, urging the Asian-born writer living in North America to turn away from Indian materials and write about the exultation and the turmoil of the immigrants' experience. The brilliant new novelist Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has done just that. Born in India but now living in California, she sees her fiction—so far a collection of short stories, *Arranged Marriage* (1995), and a novel, *The Mistress of Spices* (1997)—as a way of “dissolving boundaries.” Yet Mistry seems little concerned with such matters, and his three stories about Asians in Canada that appear in *Tales from Firozsha Baag* lack the immediacy that Mukherjee and Divakaruni attain.

Even though Mistry seldom goes back to India literally these days, he does persist in taking literary journeys. Asked if this dependence on memory rather than reality causes problems in his fictional re-creation of India, Mistry explained: “Some people might say it's arrogant of me not to live there and assume that I know everything from a visit every five or six years. But I'm confident that I *do* know. It's memory. Well—I suppose that when one says memory, it's memory plus imagination, which creates a *new* memory. When I don't have that, I will not write about it. I have promised myself that” (Smith, 65).

Mistry bristles when accused of not reporting Bombay accurately. In a newspaper article that appears on the Internet, which unfortunately provides neither a date nor a source, Mistry replies to criticism leveled by Germaine Greer, the Australian feminist writer, during a BBC-TV panel discussion before the 1996 Booker Prize award ceremony. *A*

Fine Balance, which had just received the Commonwealth Writers Best Book prize, had made the six-book shortlist for the Booker Prize; but that did not impress Greer, who grimaced and said: “I hate this book. I absolutely hate it. . . . I just don't recognize this dismal, dreary city. It's a Canadian book about India. What could be worse? What could be more terrible?” She went on to explain that she had spent four months teaching in a Bombay women's college and she had not witnessed the squalor and misery that Mistry's novel recounts, adding that the city “was so much less terrible than I had feared.” In reply to Greer's criticism, Mistry retorted: “She wants to say that those four months teaching the daughters of high society put her in a better position to judge India than I am in, having grown up there and spent 23 years before emigrating? . . . If she wanted to make the case that she did not like the book there were far better ways to do it than to say something so, so . . . I said asinine already? So brainless, really.” I would defend Mistry, because I have been to Bombay a couple of times and find his descriptions on target, just as Anita Desai's were in *Baumgartner's Bombay* (1988). Both writers catch the city's squalid side, the poverty, disorder, filth and ruin, the chaos, but at the same time engage its immense vitality and diversity.

There is, in fact, an admirable balance in Mistry's *Bombay*, which brings us back to my earlier proposition: that Mistry's writing in its development of the time-honored fictional ingredients—setting, character, style, and plot—seeks and maintains a delicate balance. And that balance leads into subtle thematic implications.

TALES FROM FIROZSHA BAAG. The middle-class Parsis who inhabit the residential block known as Firozsha Baag come to life in these eleven intersecting stories, just as the building itself takes on an embodiment of its own. Placing the characters for the most part within the confines of the apartments and allowing them to appear in more than one story lends the work a strong structure and makes it more like a novel than a collection of separate pieces. The principal element that connects the action stems from the common Parsi religion, whose roots were in Persia and whose adherents were driven out of that country once Islam attained dominance. The now-dwindling community of around 50,000 came to India some 1,300 years ago and were allowed to stay if they promised not to practice conversion; the largest settlement remains in Bombay. While the Parsis have contributed to Indian society, especially in business, far in excess of their number, and have never been persecuted, they continue to live outside the mainstream and strive to retain their distinct identity in a predominantly Hindu country. Their religious practices, based on tradition, intrude on all

avenues of their lives and appear at times to be more the product of the letter than the spirit. The younger residents in Firozsha Baag rebel, and the older ones fear the encroachment of a changing world. This conflict between religious tradition and personal fluidity creates the tension in each of the stories. The collection has been compared to Joyce's *Dubliners* and to Chekhov's work—again, fiction that focuses on a limited company but manages to unfold into a larger world. Early on, Mistry attracted the attention of the fine Canadian short-story writer Mavis Gallant, and later studied with her; he has developed a sensitivity to character, an ear for dialogue, and an exactness of detail that is comparable to her work.

Handling such a risky subject as religious beliefs and practices, in particular by a member of the Parsi community, could prove disastrous for the writer, yet Mistry sidesteps the hazards through his subtle humor along with the ironic but sympathetic treatment of Firozsha Baag's motley assortment of residents. He also equalizes tragedy and comedy. Each portrayal turns into a miniature portrait, precise and accurate, so that the Baag's dwellers represent Parsis in discord with both their religious beliefs and the larger community. At the same time, they emerge as just ordinary human beings who are sometimes likable and sometimes not, humans who grapple with spiritual questions, feelings of alienation, the terror of death, economic worries, and family friction. At least that is the way the stories appear to an outsider; of course, I am not qualified to speculate on how the Parsi reader might react. Amin Malak, in a review of the book, notes that "the writer's sympathies preclude his condemning or disowning his culture in its entirety, and the humorous rendition of character and incident makes the criticism poignantly effective and lasting" (103).

From a stylistic standpoint, Mistry might be said not to have a style, at least one that is apparent. He writes more in the tradition of India's English-language fiction before Salman Rushdie came along, followed by Arundhati Roy and *The God of Small Things* (1997): that is, in a form altogether readable, which is to say a simple, direct, refined, conventional manner. Dialogue, in particular, Mistry handles exquisitely, always catching the rhythms of Indian English. One critic commenting on *A Fine Balance* wonders why writers like Mistry and Vikram Seth in *A Suitable Boy* (1993) seem to be attracted to the Victorian fictional conventions, which is a worthwhile question but not an easy one to answer. Yet buried in this unpretentious narrative approach and unassuming prose style there appear surprising passages, such as this one in "Lend Me Your Light" that captures in striking terms a young man's reaction to Bombay on his return from North America:

As if enacting a scene for my benefit with all the subtlety of a sixteenth-century morality play, a crowd clawed its way into a local train. All the players were there: Fate and Reality, and the latter's offspring; the New Reality, and also Poverty and Hunger, Virtue and Vice, Apathy and Corruption.

The drama began when the train, Reality, rolled into the station. It was overcrowded because everyone wanted to get on it: Virtue, Vice, Apathy, Corruption, all of them. Someone, probably Poverty, dropped his plastic lunch bag amidst the stampede, nudged on by Fate. Then Reality rolled out of the station with a gnashing and clanking of its metal, leaving in its wake the New Reality. And someone else, probably Hunger, matter-of-factly picked up Poverty's mangled lunch, dusted off a *chapati* which had slipped out of the trampled bag, and went his way. In all of this, was there a lesson for me? To trim my expectations and reactions to things, trim them down to the proper proportions? (187)

The collection's final story, "Swimming Lessons," takes an original turn by setting the commonplace doings of a young Parsi immigrant in Canada against the equally mundane existence of his parents in Bombay. What makes the story extraordinary, though, comes from the unexpected. The parents receive in the mail a book that their son has just published in Canada, and they take turns reading the stories, which re-create his and their own experiences from the days before he emigrated. The action switches between the cold North and the tropical South. The son continues his activities, mainly disastrous swimming lessons, sexual fantasies, and casual but unsatisfying encounters with his apartment-house neighbors. And his parents continue to read and comment on the stories. The father is even a bit of a theorist, explaining at one point that their son is writing about earlier times, "because they are far enough in the past for him to deal with objectively, he is able to achieve what critics call artistic distance, without emotions interfering." The mother has no time for such reflections "and said it was her turn now and too much theory she did not want to listen to, it was confusing and did not make as much sense as reading the stories" (246). Her point is well taken, because the eleven stories about Firozsha Baag speak so eloquently for themselves.

SUCH A LONG JOURNEY. "But where?" Gustad Noble, the novel's central character, asks. "Where does not matter, sir," is the reply. "In a world where roadside latrines become temples and shrines, and temples and shrines become dust and ruin, does it matter where?" (338). Where and why serve as the motifs of *Such a Long Journey*, a novel about how public corruption in all its guises seeps into every crevice of experience and leaves the individual along with his community defenseless and despairing.

As the narrative opens, it moves once more into the familiar milieu of Bombay Parsis, which the earlier short-story collection introduced. The engaging but far from exceptional activities of Gustad's family, including his wife, daughter, and two sons, are revealed in minute detail, as are their physical surroundings: again a noisy and dilapidated Bombay apartment block. Even food plays an essential role, especially a live chicken Gustad brings home that provides some comic relief. At first it appears that the novel may turn into a domestic comedy. All the elements combine to make this possible: family celebrations, the strife between generations, the hus-

we are always hungry, please give us a fair share. But West said no. Then East said, in that case we don't want to work with you. So as punishment, West Pakistan is killing and burning East Pakistan." When his daughter insists that such action is "mean" and "sad," Gustad observes: "Lot of meanness and sadness in the world" (81).

This simple observation evolves into the narrative's driving force. Before long the humble but upright bank clerk Gustad finds himself involved in political intrigue. As a favor to a friend, he enters into a scheme run by the Indian intelligence agency to divert government funds, believing that he is aid-

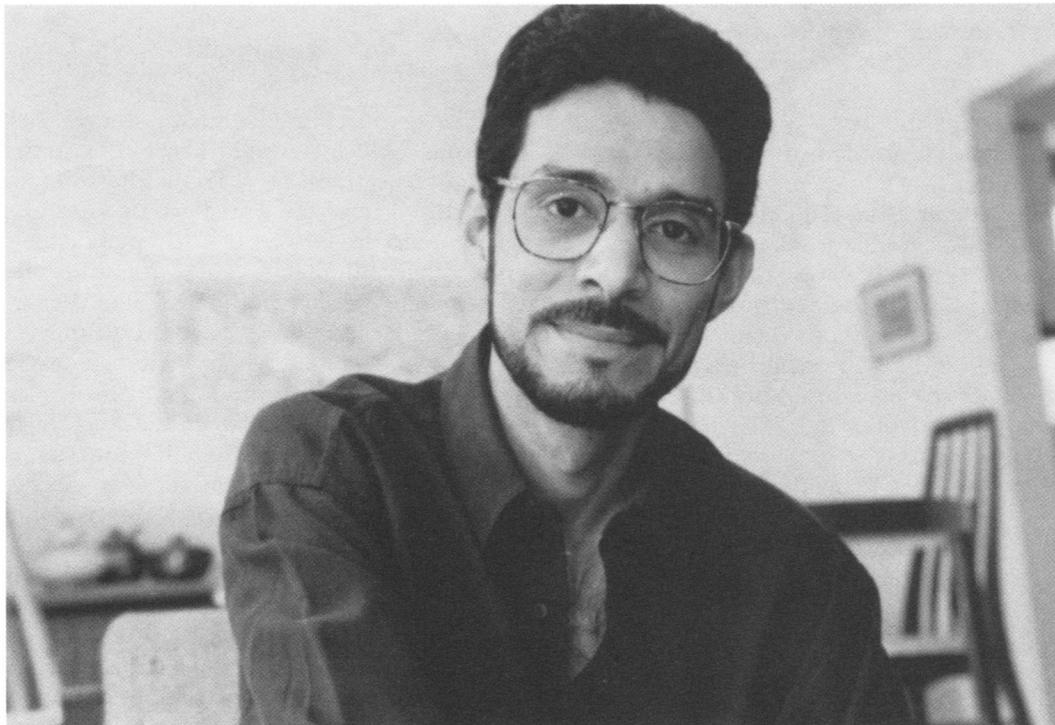


Photo: F. Mistry

ROHINTON MISTRY

band-wife bickering, the children's education and hobbies and hopes for the future, and the escapades of the neighbors. Although this attention to domesticity and family affairs continues throughout the novel, it serves as a backdrop and as a contrast to the larger world that disrupts family order.

That world is India in 1971, when India and Pakistan engaged in a thirteen-day war that ended with the liberation of East Pakistan to become the independent nation of Bangladesh. The narrative never meshes with the war directly, but reports it through newspapers, radio broadcasts, and conversations. Gustad's daughter asks at one point, "Daddy, why is West Pakistan killing the people in East Pakistan?" He replies: "Because it is wicked and selfish. East Pakistan is poor, they said to West,

ing the people of East Pakistan, whom he considers victims of West Pakistan's aggression. Gradually he realizes that he has been used as a pawn in a sinister stratagem to steal government money for the use of dishonest officials. As the story unfolds, it sets the private arena and the public orbit interacting to reveal that the two are linked. The individual and the family cannot escape the venality and ineptitude of the government.

Some of the satire directed toward Indira Gandhi and the Congress Party turns less than subtle. As well, the chaotic political, social, and economic conditions in India receive treatment tinged with bitterness. At times the censure is stated directly and is less effective—in fact mars the text—than when the ideas issue from the action and the dialogue in a

natural way. Most often, though, the social message blends into the narrative structure. Of course, reading the novel nearly thirty years after these historical events and after so many other such events have taken place around the world allows us instinctively to put them into perspective, to repeat with Gustad, "Lot of meanness and sadness in the world."

Do we need a 339-page novel to reveal such a self-evident truth? Although *Such a Long Journey* can be described plainly as a sad novel, Mistry manages, as always, to balance the conflicting forces: that is, the outside world and the inner sphere. Outside is rotten to the core, he confirms over and over again, and will corrupt the most decent man, even a man like Gustad Noble. David Townsend, in a review of the novel, notes that "the story's private dimensions are not merely weighed against political circumstance; they are revealed as the personal manifestations of the same reality. . . . At the same time, the book's ultimate concerns are deeply spiritual" (62). At the end, Gustad is damaged, and he will likely never again view the world with such innocence. "But where?" he says as the novel concludes, and enters into the security of his shabby flat. "Life will go on" is the answer to his question. In a way the narrative becomes a circular one, returning to Gustad and his family, his work, and his devotions—once he has cleaned the mud from his prayer cap and has healed his bruised soul.

A FINE BALANCE. Indira Gandhi, the Congress Party, and India's social injustice again serve as the villains in *A Fine Balance*, which takes as its epigraph the warning from Balzac's classic, *Le Père Goriot*: "Holding this book in your hand, sinking back in your soft armchair, you will say to yourself: perhaps it will amuse me. And after you have read this story of great misfortunes, you will no doubt dine well, blaming the author for your own insensitivity, accusing him of wild exaggeration and flights of fancy. But rest assured: this tragedy is not a fiction. All is true." Balzac's admonition proves appropriate as the tale of four characters unfolds over 603 pages of a finely crafted novel, even more old-fashioned in its fictional technique than *Such a Long Journey*. This time the personal misfortunes unravel against another watershed in modern Indian history: Mrs. Gandhi's State of Emergency, which suspended civil liberties in 1975. One critic called the novel India's version of *Les Misérables*, which seems apt enough.

The first of the four doomed characters to appear is Dina, a Parsi woman who had been brought up by a domineering older brother after her father's death and her mother's nervous collapse. She finally escapes endless arguments with her brother when she marries against his will, but after three years of marital happiness her husband is killed in a traffic acci-

dent. Refusing to return to the brother's house, she decides to remain in her flat and support herself, a defiant and independent act for a young Parsi widow. Before long, she hires two village tailors, Ishvar and Omprakash, both Hindus, to assist her in sewing women's clothing for an export company. Like Dina, the tailors have rebelled against tradition by daring to move out of their caste as leather-workers and to train as tailors. When they find themselves homeless after their shanty has been demolished by the government, Dina allows them, with misgivings, to share her apartment. Before long they are joined by Maneck, a Parsi student, who is the son of Dina's girlhood friend. He too has his problems, more invented than real, but he feels alienated from his family, who lost their lands in the 1947 Partition and now own a failing general store. He has been sent to the city from their mountain home to attend college and train as an engineer, a profession that his parents see as the only hope for his financial survival.

Placing such a disparate quartet into a cramped apartment and chronicling their everyday life in minute detail are what Mistry does best. It as though we have returned to a miniature Firozsha Baag, and some of the most compelling parts of the narrative depict the characters and their relationships as they develop from wariness into trust, then into love for one another. Unlike the earlier fiction, *A Fine Balance* goes outside the secure flat and beyond the city by the sea into the village of the two tailors and the idyllic mountain home of the student. These locales are rendered with the same care Mistry takes with city life.

All too soon, though, the communal harmony of the four unlikely companions is shattered by the world outside the four walls that enclose and protect them. The invading forces are economic, social, and political. Dina struggles to make ends meet and to fill the demands of the woman who heads the clothing exporters. The two tailors, just when their lives have taken on some order, return to their village for a wedding and fall victim to India's cruelest social constraint: the caste system. Although Maneck's problems seem self-imposed or a result of his overdrawn sensitivity, he finally succumbs to what he considers the hypocrisy of his country's government and commits suicide. At the end the tailors survive as beggars on the streets, one of them turned into a eunuch as village retribution for his arrogance in defying the caste system. Dina is sentenced to her brother's home as a domestic drudge. Every afternoon she secretly provides a meal for the men who worked for her in better days. And the account of "great misfortunes" comes to a close. That the one member of the foursome best equipped to succeed economically should kill himself is heavy with irony. In contrast, the less fortunate survive by achieving

what one character calls “a fine balance between hope and despair.”

This summary merely skims over the agony these haunting characters endure: humiliation in every form possible, torment in a government-run work camp, torture, violation of human decency, bitter disappointment and disillusionment—to list but a few trials. Neither does it do justice to the variety of supporting characters: ranging from Dina’s bigoted brother, who represents a particular social class in India; to the Beggarmaster, who shares the secrets of street life; to the mysterious proofreader, who serves as the novel’s philosopher. A summary also fails to capture the flawless rendering of the Indian scene, especially Bombay. One reviewer calls the novel “a distinguished addition to the mythologizing of Bombay” (Gurnah, 22).

Just as he did in *Such a Long Journey*, Mistry spends time in this novel castigating Indira Gandhi and her cohorts. One passage draws a brutal picture of the prime minister addressing a rally and incorporates the shallowness, emptiness, delusion, and self-serving attitudes Mistry sees as characterizing both Mrs. Gandhi and the Congress Party, which had ruled India almost continuously since independence. Even Mrs. Gandhi’s ordering of the attack on the Sikhs’ Golden Temple plays a prominent role. Although such forays into open condemnation are potent, the novel is at its best when the fictionalized facts of the characters’ lives speak for themselves.

Broad in its range, powerful in its execution, numbing in its reality, *A Fine Balance* asks what Hilary Mantel calls an “age-old” question: “In the face of the world’s beauty, in the face of the self-evident fact of altruism, how can atrocious conduct occur, how can hideous beliefs survive? The question is age-old, and Mistry has no answers, but it is evident

from the seriousness and weight of the present book that he believes that novelists should go on asking, and asking” (6). It is true that Mistry answers this overriding question only indirectly. The old proofreader says, “Let me tell you a secret: there is no such thing as an uninteresting life,” and goes on to tell Maneck that he would like to hear his life story because “It’s very important. . . . It’s extremely important because it helps to remind yourself of who you are. Then you can go forward, without fear of losing yourself in this ever-changing world” (594–95). Although in this novel the characters’ lives appear to have lost their importance, although the balance between hope and despair has almost tipped, the age-old question has been well asked. If it continues to be asked, then perhaps the significance of the individual and the necessity of spiritual balance will never be fully lost.

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