Conclusion – Rohinton Mistry: international man of stories

Twentieth-century Indians ... have voyaged widely in search of livelihoods and ideas, and they have discovered themselves through the clarities, oversights and yearnings that distance induces. The exact character of the homelands they have journeyed from has proved elusive, and often imaginary. Where in the world is India? (Sunil Khilnani, *The Idea of India*, p. 198)

ROHINTON Mistry has produced fictions characterised by a style that is at once unobtrusive and apparently direct, but which contains considerable symbolic complexity. He has deployed this seductive yet dynamic combination of simplicity and sophistication to analyse characters coming to terms with social and political circumstances that often induce severe strain, and which force them to face up to awkward questions about morality, politics and personal responsibility. I have argued that *Tales from Firozsha Baag* encodes questions of belonging, migration and identity in a text which is, at the same time, testing generic boundaries and mimicking and rejecting the clichés of literary consolation. The first novel, *Such a Long Journey*, asks questions about the trustworthiness of language as communication in a climate of political intrigue and duplicity and, while concluding that the consolations of friendship and loyalty are to be recommended, also acknowledges their temporary nature. *A Fine Balance* carries these interests onto the battlefield that is the India of Mrs Gandhi’s Emergency, a terrain populated by grimacing henchman and stoical eccentrics whose larger-than-life qualities take the book beyond the realm
of that documentary realism sometimes seen as symptomatic of the author’s writing. It also uses a variety of literary tropes and discourses as it weaves its narrative fabric, creating a quilt which sustains and supports both characters and readers as they experience the giddy fluctuations of a menacing, topsy-turvy world. Even in the ostensibly more traditional Family Matters, similar issues of corruption versus integrity are explored. Here, notions of the multiple and sometimes conflicting demands of duty are set alongside filial loyalty, personal vengeance and religious faith. Family certainly does matter to this author, but family-type units can materialise in unexpected ways and the ties of blood are often as onerous and oppressive as they are nurturing and supportive. At the same time, in each of his novels, Mistry, like those other influential members of the second generation of postcolonial Indian writers in English, Salman Rushdie, Bapsi Sidhwa and Amitav Ghosh, interrogates and often challenges the complacencies and orthodoxies of those secular and religious elites who run the nation and seek to shape it in their own image.

Bruce King has argued that the ‘commonwealth writer in exile’ has, in a sense, stolen a march on his postmodern metropolitan contemporaries in assimilating and creating literary styles to represent the fissures of a ‘translated’, alienated existence. He says of these writers:

They are deconstructionists, not out of the logic that led others from structuralism to post-structuralism, but from the experience of divided, uprooted, unassimilated lives; but they are also reconstructionists in that for those genuinely threatened by chaos the logic of survival requires some new order, even if only provisional.¹

Perhaps this explains Mistry’s fascination with pattern. His characters seek patterns and shapes in the chaos of everyday lives slowly falling apart, sometimes by raiding fond memories, sometimes by reversion to the primal consolations of religious and ethnic identifications, and sometimes, more profitably, by sifting what is valuable in the past and filtering out prejudices
which tie them down. The resulting patterns can be interwoven with those of contemporary lived experience to give a sense of where one has come from and, hence, where one might be going.

Mistry’s Zoroastrian background informs each of his texts, providing both the subject matter and the coordinates by which his protagonists understand their encounters with the outside world. The Zoroastrian principles that inform their lives also direct their responses to the moral dilemmas they face. They can also provide interesting interpretative clues for the reader prepared to take a little time to find out more about the Parsis and their world. This ethnic identity also impacts on Mistry’s style, complicating its inherent hybridity. Nilufer E. Bharucha has commented of the Parsis: ‘As a diasporic people, they have perfected the art of existing in a state of liminality, partaking of different cultures yet ultimately retaining for themselves the refuge of their formative ethno-religious identity.’ Mistry’s style appears to have evolved its characteristic features – the measured clarity of the European novel leavened by the dialogic energy of eastern storytelling traditions – to deal with the multiple interpellations of conflictual ideologies. For a writer such as Mistry then, perhaps it is the case, as Tanya Luhrmann has put it, that ‘identity in a modern postcolonial context is less a self-characterising narrative with a mirroring world than a sense of command over narrative complexity’. Thus, while aware of the limitations of realism, Mistry does not concede that linguistic systems are purely self-reflexive. He recognises that part of the storyteller’s role is to find forms appropriate to the overlapping identities – Canadian, Zoroastrian, Indian and so on – he embodies. His philosophy regarding this necessity is straightforward: ‘I don’t think I have a message … I grew up in Bombay. Now I am here [in Canada]. I’m a writer. I am determined to write good literature. This is my primary concern. But to write well, I must write about what I know best. In that way, I automatically speak for my “tribe”.’

Despite having lived in Canada since 1975, Mistry’s fiction is imbued with the spirit of Bombay. Bombay is more than merely a location. It provides what might be described as a
habitat in which characters live, breath and confront their spiritual and material demons. Indeed, Bombay is a vast treasure house of stories. In *A Fine Balance* the city is a space of shared stories: a ‘story spinning mill’. For Mistry, such stories, told and retold to new acquaintances, work to mitigate the confusion of life, offering a temporary unity, and a balm to the psychic sufferings caused by time and change. In a sense, this can be seen as one of storytelling’s deepest and oldest functions. Richard Kearney reminds us that ‘Myths arose, as Lévi-Strauss says, as “machines for the suppression of time”. Or, as Tolkien puts it, as ways of expressing our yearning for the Great Escape – from death.’ Likewise, Mistry has suggested that, for all his characters, the question remains essentially the same: ‘Why death? Why must we struggle with life and die?’ The misfortunes they experience are, to an extent, determined by political forces over which they have little or no direct control. However, the essence of the domestic tragedies played out in his pages inheres in what Shomit Dutta has described as ‘the interaction of external forces and personal choice’. The combination of the material specificities of injustice and the spiritual apprehensions informing his world view – Zoroastrianism tinged with Platonism – at times lend Mistry’s writing a similar aspect to that of the dissident writer Alexander Solzhenitsyn. There is the same tussle of pragmatism and idealism, the same preoccupation with the question of whether ‘environment determines consciousness’ or whether, as a character in Solzhenitsyn’s *The First Circle* insists:

> Man is invested from birth with a certain … essence. It is as if it were the nucleus of his personality, his ego. The only question is – which determines which? Is man formed by life or does he, if he has a strong enough personality, shape life around him? … because he has something against which to measure himself. Because he can look at an image of perfection, which at rare moments manifests itself to his inward ego.

Bombay gives birth to Mistry’s characters, but they venture forth into a wider world in both literal and literary senses.
This comparison with Solzhenitsyn calls to mind those other European, and especially Russian, writers Mistry is thought to resemble. However, it is important to recognise that Mistry is a novelist of ethics rather than a novelist of ideas as such. In this he more closely resembles Turgenev than Dostoyevsky or Tolstoy. Like Turgenev, he is a master of description, with an eye for those details – of dress, deportment, attitude – that mark out differences in social status. Likewise, he is not a writer who often digresses into extended social or political critiques in his work. Instead, he allows paradoxes and injustices to emerge in character and situation. How people treat one another as individuals, often in situations where exploitation and manipulation have become the norm, is more significant than whether they adhere to any particular political ideology. It might therefore be claimed – as it often is about nineteenth-century liberal novelists – that, in a subcontinent increasingly characterised by hegemonic, communitarian and neo-colonial power, such liberal individualism, blind to class structures, allows the writer to diagnose contemporary ills but, at the same time, prevents him from offering any solutions. In any case, ethical considerations form a strong part of Zoroastrianism too, where the choice between good and evil is enshrined in the central moral code, ‘good thoughts, good words, good deeds’, and in the Persian narrative tradition; the Shah-Namah frequently interrupts its battle scenes and royal hunts to raise questions of moral responsibility: as in the disputation between the sage Buzurjmehr and King Naoshirvan on kingly goodness, and when Asmail and Karmail enlist as cooks to save one of every two men slain to feed the tyrant Zuhaak.9

Similarly, Mistry’s writing raises ethical questions which, while played out through the characters, are left to the reader to resolve. In one sense all narrative does this. However, the recurring trope of the instinctive desire for communication stymied by a divisive and authoritarian political hierarchy, common to Mistry’s novels, give such questions an urgent insistence. Perhaps Paul Ricoeur, quoted by Richard Kearney,
indirectly provides one of the most recognisable accounts of the experience of reading a Mistry novel. He claims that the strategy of persuasion undertaken by the narrator of any given novel:

is aimed at giving the reader a vision of the world that is never ethically neutral, but rather implicitly or explicitly induces a new evaluation of the world and of the reader as well. In this sense, narrative already belongs to the ethical field in virtue of its claim – inseparable from its narration – to ethical justice. Still, it belongs to the reader, now an agent, an initiator of action, to choose among the multiple proposals of ethical justice brought forth by the reading.10

In addition to the various literary prizes Mistry’s writing has won, further recognition came in December 2001, when *A Fine Balance* was chosen to feature on Oprah Winfrey’s television ‘Book Club’. According to Mistry’s Canadian agent, Bruce Westwood, ‘After September 11, Oprah wanted a Book Club choice that would introduce American readers to the east’.11 Ironically, less than a year later, this most unassuming and tolerant of writers felt compelled to abandon a promotional tour of the United States for his new novel, *Family Matters*, because of the ‘humiliating’ and ‘unbearable’ ‘racial profiling’ to which he was subjected at each airport along the way. It is one of those paradoxes of contemporary political history and its ‘libertarian’ discourses, that Mistry should have become one of the most high-profile victims of the racially-tinged institutional paranoia that has trailed in the wake of the Twin Towers attack.

Ultimately, Mistry’s fiction offers the satisfactions of recognition to those familiar with the machinations of postcolonial Indian politics and the position of the Parsis as a vulnerable minority, and to general readers who may know little about the background, but who can identify with the characters, their experiences and life choices. Speaking of this quality in his work, Mistry has commented, ‘The Parsi characters in my stories, and their dreams, ambitions and fears are as accessible to the western reader as to the Indian reader … I don’t say to myself: “This story needs three doses of
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universality and five doses of particularity.” When I start writing it all just happens.” 12 This blend of universality and cultural and contextual specificity gives Mistry’s texts their readability and seems likely to ensure their longevity too.

Of his own reasons for continuing to write, Mistry is disarmingly candid: ‘I once read, I think it was by Camus, that one can redeem oneself by writing and that has stayed with me and I think that is why I began to write. I wasn’t sure how redemption would come through writing, but I’m still writing.” 13