

Small is Beautiful

As chroniclers of the community go, few writers manage the detailed prose marking Rohinton Mistry's contentious work

BY MEHER MARFATIA



TOO bad I finished from St Xavier's College in 1984, eleven years after Rohinton Mistry did. Rather than the '60s, I should've been born two decades later, a wary contemporary of the Thackeray scion infamous for withdrawing Mistry's book *Such a*

Long Journey from a once respected university's curriculum. Then I might have had the luck to properly study the "objectionable" novel and not just read it.

This isn't my favourite Mistry saga, *Tales from Firozsha Baug* and *Family Matters* are. But that's personal preference, not the issue here.

To delve beyond books savoured for pleasure and plumb their more challenging depths. Both strong reasons to drive me to the rigour of juggling work on an English Lit postgraduate degree even with a fulltime journalist job. What incredibly gifted English professors graced institutions like Xavier's and Elphinstone.

Those at my alma mater enthused some of us to soar our way excitedly further than the standard BA course.

A prescribed text becomes almost sacred if great teachers share its very beat and flow with hungry minds. I vividly recall the rise and fall of their richly cadenced voices explaining the book each taught. When Nisha da Cunha discussed the dynamic politics behind Alan Paton's *Cry the Beloved Country*, her measured, mellifluous tones jumped us back to mid-1940s Johannesburg in beautifully complete detail. The polished prose of her own short stories is as unique, marked by the kind of disconcerting

quiet observation and keen analysis in Jane Austen's narratives.

There was Eunice de Souza, who deftly took a class into deep stream of consciousness mode with Mrs Dalloway. Emerging with a minutely beamed focus on Virginia Woolf's world, we imagined every subtle nuance of the bohemian Bloomsbury Group heyday. The search for picturing miniature marvels in literature continued with seasoned MA lecturers like Govind Shahani, Vrinda Nabar and Heera Stevens.

Authentic detail is a critical aspect we were mentored to appreciate early on, learning to listen close to wizards of the fine-tuned word. Mistry's Firozsha Baug offered an ideal example, tracing the quirky little foibles and fun afforded by an affectionately etched community. As always, a few spoilsports proved blind to the enjoyable portrait of their lovingly lampooned species. They murmured protest at Parsis shown a shade over-eccentric. Hey, this is who we are.

Ame amuch chhaiye! that debut book's fans affirm in stout support.

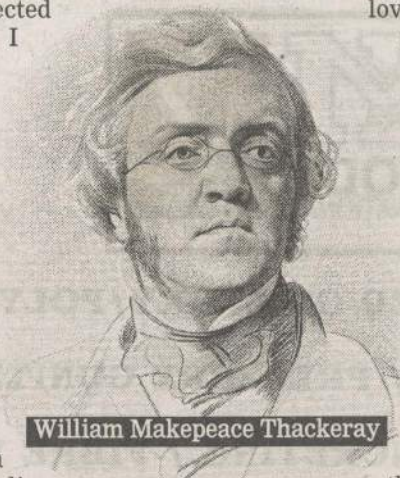
Finely drawn plot and careful characterisation in books Mistry's reviewers term "Indo nostalgic", may well be rooted in the Toronto-based writer's Mumbai past. A reclusive child known for an assured writing style, Mistry confesses he grew up the "watchful" sibling compared with playwright brother Cyrus.

Today, his denouncers myopically miss the point. The targeted novel spares no

Indian or international community, its protagonists equally rib and crib everyone out. Yet, cultural watchdogs selectively pick on perceived literary lapses in what is actually a story of healing and reconciliation.

The Victorian age feted William Makepeace Thackeray as a supreme satirist. Writers following him include Mistry, aware that fiction like *Vanity Fair* carps away at whole swaths of humanity, but swishes a feather-light touch throughout. Thackeray's heroes boldly say what they want. They retain universal popularity, still cropping up in recommended reads at college level.

Their creator's middle name is Makepeace. How's that for irony?



William Makepeace Thackeray

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