

Saborna Roychowdhury. *The Distance*. Kolkata, India: Monfakira, 2009. Pp. 236.

\$10.50.

Reviewed by Robin E. Field, King's College

Saborna Roychowdhury addresses the perennial questions facing contemporary Indian women in her first novel, *The Distance*, and offers some surprising answers. Her protagonist, Mini, ponders duty and tradition versus personal ambition, arranged marriage versus a love match, and the allure of living in the West versus the familiarity of life in India. Roychowdhury offers a fresh take on these dilemmas while also underscoring the difficulty of finding any satisfactory resolution.

The Distance is narrated by Mini, a twenty-year-old college student in Calcutta. Mini's family – in particular, her grandmother – is eager to arrange a marriage for her, but Mini has other ideas. Marriage, she has observed, leads to no great happiness. Her grandmother becomes a dour, unhappy woman and religious zealot after her husband impregnates their maid, and she leaves him and declares herself a widow rather than live with such a man. Mini's mother, bewitched by the good looks of one prospective match, insists on marrying this impecunious man with few employment prospects; however, Mini's father proves to be a sullen and sneering man not worthy of her affection. This marriage too becomes one constituted of duty and tradition rather than love and friendship. Despite these unfortunate examples of love and marriage within her family, Mini does fall in love with a fellow student, Amitav. He is a radical, the leader of the college's Communist party, and a fervent speech-maker and charismatic leader of protests.

Mini is drawn to Amitav despite of, rather than because of his politics. She may not be satisfied with options afforded her by her middle-class life, but she does not fully embrace the protest lifestyle or Amitav's politics. In an initial description of Amitav, Mini thinks: "Sometimes I wished he was more like the boys in my class who liked to watch Hindi films, worry about fashion trends, and whistle at pretty girls walking by. But Amitav had no time for women or fashion" (22). Although Amitav spends time with Mini, he shows little evidence that he sees her as his future wife. Instead, he seems to regard Mini as a challenge: how often can he goad her into breaking her parents' and society's rules? His greatest test is his insistence that she accompany him to a remote village to protest the cruelties of the local landlord. Mini acquiesces and enjoys the energy of the protest initially. However, when the danger of the situation becomes clear – for the landlord is not above killing those who are against him – she is eager to leave the village and return to her parents' apartment. In what seems Amitav's most manipulative move, he comes to her bed and makes love to her. His action seems less a demonstration of his feelings for Mini than an incentive for her to remain with him at the protest. The next morning one of their friends is found dead, and Mini demands that Amitav leave with her for Calcutta. Not surprisingly, he refuses, wanting to continue to fight against the landlord's evil ways. Mini is shocked that he won't give up his revolutionary politics for her sake and, disillusioned, she returns to Calcutta. As readers, however, we are not so surprised, as Amitav never indicated that he would abandon his principles for a middle-class marriage.

After mourning for Amitav for a year, Mini decides that she should accept an arranged marriage, naively thinking that "I needed a change in milieu, a little more

freedom, and marriage was my only passport out” (98). She marries Neel, a boy from an appropriate caste and a graduate student living in Vancouver. Their marriage is happy initially, as Mini enjoys the luxuries of their apartment in Canada and the intimacies of marriage. However, she is dismayed to learn that Neel has no intention of returning to India after earning his degree, and she grows disillusioned with her acquaintances, who appear aloof and materialistic. It is only after Mini leaves India that she truly appreciates her life there. The novel concludes with Mini’s decision about her future: Will she stay with Neel in Canada and embrace a comfortable if bland middle-class existence? Or will she return to India – and possibly to Amitav – to be close to her family and her cultural roots?

The Distance offers no simple solutions to the social problems presented therein. Mini’s story demonstrates how stifling life may be for middle-class women in Calcutta. Although she and other women study for bachelor and master’s degrees, their education primarily serves as a tool for attracting a suitable husband, who will himself be responsible for supporting the family; it is heartbreaking to see one minor character, Radha, working in a Canadian laundry despite her master’s degree. The novel details many social problems in India – corrupt politicians, ineffective police, extreme poverty – but social action, in the form of Amitav’s speeches and marches, appear to result in danger and death for the reformers rather than any real societal change. Emigration to Western countries is rightly critiqued as a solution for a privileged few and no failsafe for personal happiness. The novel’s evocative title, broadly taken, reminds us of the space between the ideal world and grim reality.

The Distance does contain certain flaws not uncommon in a first novel. The dialogue is awkward at times, reading as exposition because of its complex sentence structure; consider Amitav's words to Mini: "Then, placing her stylish sunglasses on the top of her head, she hastily jotted down a note and her driver passed it on to me" (199). Roychowdhury takes occasional liberties with her characters' personalities, most notably with Samita, Mini's best friend at college, a chemistry major who "dreamt of becoming a researcher and finding cures for fatal diseases" (30). Five years later she is, without any explanation from the author, "Bengal's filmy heartthrob" (199). Mini herself contains similar incongruities. For instance, she tells Radha that in India she led protests and that she misses the roil of revolutionary politics; yet in earlier pages she showed no such instigation or enthusiasm. While Mini may be subconsciously revising her past out of loneliness and boredom from her life as a Canadian housewife, the text itself simply seems contradictory, rather than demonstrating the complexities of an evolving character. Most puzzling, though, is the denouement of the novel. Mini and Amitav stumble into one last dangerous situation in the final chapter, but Roychowdhury abruptly takes us away from that shocking moment and into a rambling epilogue that divulges further improbable plot developments described in precious few sentences. The story would have been better served had these developments been described in several more chapters.

Despite these flaws, *The Distance* offers a thoughtful story about the plight of a young woman trying to find happiness amidst many challenges. Ultimately, this novel offers not a love triangle between Mini, Amitav, and Neel, but a love letter to India itself.