

**Intercultural Harmony:
Nilufer Bharucha's "The Benediction" at the Contemporary Writers' Forum**

This year's guest for the "Contemporary Writer's Forum" was Dr. Nilufer Bharucha, a Professor and Head of the English Department at the University of Mumbai.

Prof. Bharucha told the participants she has "always" written short stories and first started publishing them at age 20 in *The Illustrated Weekly of India*, *Eve's Weekly* and the *Indian PEN*. After starting as a tutor at undergraduate college and becoming a well-known scholar, her own creative writing slowed down considerably. Nilufer Bharucha has also been a guest professor at many universities in Europe and in the USA. Nevertheless she has published many articles and stories. She also co-edited several books, as well as authoring a book on Rohinton Mistry's fiction entitled, *Rohinton Mistry: Ethnic Enclosures and Transcultural Spaces*.

The main focus of her stories has always been the situation of the Parsi Zoroastrians in India, a small ethno-religious minority. After originally emigrating from Iran in the 8th and 9th centuries, the Parsi Zoroastrians are now, in the post-colonial period, experiencing a feeling of insecurity. Today's Parsi writers are possibly the last to capture the uniqueness of their culture.

For our class session, Nilufer Bharucha brought a rewrite of her story "The Benediction." A Parsi man flees from a beggar woman and from the people criticising him for not giving in to her pleas. Sohrab walks home, past Hindus worshipping Ganesha, the elephant-god. His dislike of their religion is very profound and clear. He feels as if the Hindus have taken away everything from the Parsi, leaving them with nothing to call their own. Finally home, he confronts his father, who seems to be much more open-minded than his son. Mahiyar, the father, tells his son to let them be. He does not share his son's claim that their own Parsi god, Ahura Mazda, is superior to Ganesha. "They are all one," he tells Sohrab. The next day, Sohrab again meets the beggar woman.

Our task was to write an ending for the story, to think of a way the story might end. Sohrab meets the woman. Will he turn his back on her again? Or will he finally show mercy, realizing that they as fellow Parsi have to help each other? The story is, after all, named "The Benediction." The Blessing. Who blesses whom? If he gives her the money she wants, maybe she will bless him for his kindness. Or will he pray to his god, asking for a blessing, a little more tolerance? Or is his father right in the end? Are all gods one, so that it does not really matter to whom he prays? It turns out he sees the outstretched arm of Ganesha again after meeting the beggar woman. His arm is raised, involuntarily blessing Sohrab, the Parsi who does not believe in him. So maybe, in the end there are signs of an approach between the two different cultures towards more tolerance and harmony on both sides.

Sarah Wagener