Rohinton Mistry is a Parsi born in Bombay in 1952. Growing up in Bombay, he had many opportunities to observe the kind of Parsi enclaves he has evoked so powerfully in his two published works of fiction. He emigrated to Toronto in 1975 where he worked for ten years in a bank. He studied English and Philosophy part-time at the University of Toronto. In 1983, he wrote his first short story, “One Sunday,” which won the Hart House Prize that year in the literary contest at the University of Toronto. He won this award again in the year 1984 for “Auspicious Occasion.” In 1985, the year in which he won the Annual Contributors Prize from the Canadian Fiction Magazine, Mistry gave up his bank job and devoted himself fully to writing. In 1987, his collection of short stories, Tales from Firozsha Baag, was published by Penguin Canada and has since reappeared in Great Britain and the US under the title Swimming Lessons and Other Stories from Firozsha Baag. The book was very well reviewed in British and North American journals and it was short-listed for Canada’s Governor-General’s Award.

In 1991, Mistry’s first novel, Such a Long Journey, was nominated for Britain’s prestigious Booker Prize and won the
Governor-General's Literary Award for English Language Fiction. In March 1992, *Such a Long Journey* also received the W.H. Smith/Books in Canada First Novel Award. According to an interview that Mistry gave to Val Ross, “Mistry begins work each day at 8.30 or 9 AM. Although he loves classical music, he works in silence; he drinks tea before, but not while he sits at his computer. He breaks for lunch at noon – bread and cold cuts, Canadian food – reads magazines for half an hour, and then works through the afternoon. He wrote his first novel in three drafts.” The world of Indian superstition in *Such a Long Journey* is far removed from the western society of Toronto in Canada where Rohinton Mistry wrote the novel.

The fictional world of Rohinton Mistry as reflected in both *Tales from Firozsha Baag* and *Such a Long Journey* centres on a lower middle class segment of the Parsi community of metropolitan Bombay. The world of the Khodadad Building this novel creates is but an extension of Firozsha Baag. Either of these two fictional locations forms a microcosm in itself with all its diverse cast of characters and their normal human struggles and their extraordinary range of eccentricities. The world of Khodadad Building is richly suffused with the breath of contemporary Bombay as is Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* or Nissim Ezekiel’s poetry. Firozsha Baag and Khodadad Building are at once part of the sprawling metropolis as
well as a world apart, just as the Parsi community retains its distinctive ethos and culture in a predominantly Hindu India.

Sanskrit *Katha Sarith Sagara*, is a virtual ocean of stories from Kashmir. The manner in which characters and events in Mistry's stories and novels are introduced and then skillfully linked together to run into a stream of stories is interestingly Indian and reminds us of the Sanskrit tradition. Mistry's own cherished metropolis, Bombay, "the city by sea" leads the reader to a "village by the river" up in the mountains and takes him back on a picaresque journey of discovery to the same cosmopolitan city of multiple dimensions. *A Fine Balance* is a novel that moves the enchanted reader across the vast seas of experience, from the ecstasy of the Indian Independence in 1947 to its traumatic Emergency under Indira Gandhi's rule in 1975. The immensity of the contrast is highlighted by Mistry in his inimitable, forthright Indian English presentation of facts with a touch of irony and humour.

Four years after *Such a Long Journey*, Mistry published *A Fine Balance* in the year 1995. It took him that long time to ruminate over the gestation of an epic of a novel stretched over 752 pages. As far as the title of this novel goes, the book does maintain a fine balance among the multitudes of characters and the various strands of the complex plot that it projects. It draws hugely upon the traditional art of the Indian narrative fiction and upon jokes and puns and topical
references that are all Indian. They go beyond the narrow Parsi circle – Mistry's favourite ground – from his very first work of fiction onwards into the much vaster caste-ridden Hindu society.

David Townsend observes rightly that "Rohinton Mistry rises superbly to the challenge with *A Fine Balance*, a compulsively readable tale that spans nine years, from 1975 to 1984." Set in rural and urban India, the novel tells of the epic struggles of Ishvar Darji and his nephew, Omprakash, two rural untouchables from a family of tanners who struggle to rise above their designated caste role and better themselves by becoming tailors. The entire episode is Mistry's harsh and violent comment on the exploitation of low caste people who succumb to the machinations of their upper caste seducers. From Rohinton Mistry's fictional account, so graphically presented, one gets the idea that this is the reality that still exists in the Indian subcontinent. The tragic irony is that a high caste lust-perverted man is likely to be polluted even by the shadow of a low caste chamaar. This anomaly of double standards is interestingly projected by Mulk Raj Anand in *Untouchable*, a novel which foreshadows this theme. Rohinton Mistry lays stress on the secular character of the Indian ethos by demonstrating how Hindu Dukhi's sons and Muslim Ashraf's family look after each other in times of uncertainty and communal discord. Thus strong bonds of unity for all times to come are forged in
spite of the British strategy of dividing the country into India and Pakistan.

The value of *A Fine Balance* as a fictional account of historical facts is enhanced by the Indian Parsi writer's intimate critical knowledge of the events of history and social background that provides the canvas to this novel. It needs an Indian-born and bred writer to appreciate and evaluate the current situation in India from sympathetic as well as critical point of view at any given period of time. Mistry's account of the Bombay Parsi community and its travails – the favourite subject of Mistry's Canadian-Indian fiction in English – on which he concentrates in all the three fictional works of his is here projected through the life and experiences of Dina who is unfortunately left alone to fend for herself after the death of her loving husband, Rustom, in a freak accident. Mistry provides these elements as the sauce to his main dish of India under Indira Gandhi's Emergency in *A Fine Balance*. It is remarkable that Rohinton Mistry has written a popular novel based on such a controversial theme and that the novel was short-listed for the Booker award.

Since 1983, Rohinton Mistry has established himself quite rapidly as an exciting new voice on the Canadian literary scene. His two published works of fiction are solid evidence of his prodigious talents as a writer and of the richness of language and texture he brings to his craft. As an immigrant writer, Mistry has surely felt the
pressure of the still nascent Canadian nationalism to write more about his new homeland. As a person of non-French, non-English origins, he has probably incorporated his reflections on multiculturalism in his works of fiction. An immigrant writer's total experience is palimpsestically stored in his or her memory, and only the writer's own conscious choices and unconscious energies regulate its artistic expression. By incorporating in his fiction the feelings, emotions, thoughts and experiences that make up the continuum of an immigrant writer's personal history, Mistry has demolished, by the brilliant examples of his literary choices, the false gods that his contemporary Bharati Mukherjee has idolized in her statements such as "Immigrant Writing: Give Us Your Maximalists." It is much less important to make a distinction between the expatriate writer and the immigrant writer, as a Mukherjee does, than to examine what any particular writer has done with the materials chosen. Mukherjee does not acknowledge that the immigrant experience in literature could be as "dead" and "charming"; or as exoticized as the re-created experience of an ancestral land. Mistry's tales of his Bombay past are anything but dead and charming; in the richness of detail he manages to evoke with gentle irony and in the resonance of his language and imagery, his narrative take a full measure of the human experience - a domain no less worthy of a new Canadian writer than of a Dickens or a George Eliot. Rohinton Mistry and Bharati Mukherjee are well known
immigrant Canadian writers whose literary creation makes our concept of literature of the Indian Diaspora in Canada quite clear.

The 1980s also saw the emergence of the second generation of post-colonial Indian English writers. This period coincides with what Edward Said has called the second stage of anti-colonial resistance when a post-colonial society, having achieved political sovereignty, makes a determined effort to shake off the continuing socio-cultural domination of the erstwhile colonizer – the battle now is for "cultural territory." As Rushdie put it, post-colonial society then seeks to "repossess its own history." Frantz Fanon has called this the "cultural nationalist" phase.

In the case of Parsi writers, to the post-colonial concern of cultural autonomy and repossessing of history was added the need to assert a distinct identity and recall the ethno-religious characteristics of the Parsis. In an interview, Rohinton Mistry has said that when the Parsis have disappeared from the face of earth, his writing will "preserve a record of how they lived, to some extent." However, he claims that this is not the central focus of his writing.

In spite of this disclaimer, Mistry's discourse does revolve round the detailing of Parsi identity. It also reveals how Parsis are learning to cope with the reality of post-colonial India and how they are coming to terms with their new lives in the West. Mistry's fiction is fashioned
in the form of alternative narrative and employs anti-realistic modes of narration. He experiments with linguistic hybridity and celebrates the unique Parsi idiom in his writing. This is true of both Tales from Firozsha Baag and Such a Long Journey. Using a refinement of the technique he demonstrated in creating the cautionary tale of the bank clerk, Gustad Noble, in Such a Long Journey. Mistry employs straightforward story-telling, uses a simple but compelling plot, and creates strong characterizations. Individual readers will have to decide for themselves if Mistry's ending is too melodramatic or the resolution of his novel too extreme.

Scholarly studies of Mistry's fiction are on the increase. Mistry will definitely receive more attention in the academy once his prize-winning novel becomes more easily accessible for classroom adoption. In an essay entitled: "Insider/Outsider: Views on Belonging: The Short Stories of Bharati Mukherjee and Rohinton Mistry", Amin Malak contrasts Mukherjee's "satirical style" with Mistry's "gentle and penetrating irony" which is reminiscent of Joyce. However, Malak recognizes the similarity in the two writers' subject matter. Both deal, in his view, with "frightened beleagued minorities". In Mistry, it is Parsis enclosed by a predominantly Hindu culture. While darkness and defeat mark Mukherjee's treatment of her characters, Mistry's humorous rendition of a traditional community precludes his condemning or disowning his culture in its entirety.
Mistry's *Such a Long Journey* and *A Fine Balance* have been widely reviewed in Canada, Britain, the United States, and India. Most of the reviewers have praised his books for their realistic and humorous portrayal of Bombay Parsis and have recognized the control and craftsmanship revealed in the fictional art of Mistry. He has been especially credited with powerful characterization and with an economy in the use of his images and symbols. For example, Rohinton Mistry's description of the wall outside Khodadad Building and his funny but effective use of differing toilet habits as an icon of nearly insurmountable cultural differences reveal his insightful narrative rendering. Rohinton Mistry's fictional world has been compared in its microcosmic quality to R.K.Narayan's Malgudi. His art reminds us of Anita Desai's fiction in its elegance of writing, V.S.Naipaul's novels in its tragicomic quality, and Charles Dickens in the attempt at capturing epic grandeur.
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