CHAPTER SEVEN

THE SUMMING UP
No doubt, the most interesting aspect of the fiction at the turn of the present century, from the Indian point of view, is the emergence of new talent. A number of novelists have produced significant novels, making a mark in the literary world. The most important literary event in the recent past was the publication of Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* which received an international acclaim within a night. It also inspired a generation of young Indian novelists who eagerly followed his footsteps. Among
the novelists, the notable ones are Vikram Seth, Amitav Ghosh, Upamanyu Chatterjee, Shashi Tharoor, Mukul Kesavan and Rohinton Mistry.

Rohinton Mistry, the socio-political novelist, has emerged as a significant literary figure during the recent century. He was born in Bombay on July 3, 1952 to Behram Mistry and Freny Jhaveri Mistry and migrated to Canada in 1975. Growing up in Bombay, he had many opportunities to observe the kind of Parsi enclaves that he has evoked so powerfully in his four published works of fiction. Tales from Firozsha Baag [1987] Such a Long Journey [1991], A Fine Balance [1995] and Family Matters [2002]. He attended the Villa Theresa Primary School’ and St. Xavier High’ School, before finishing a, bachelor’s degree in science at St. Xavier’s College, University of Bombay in 1974. Upon leaving ‘the university, he married Freny Elavia’, and soon after their arrival in Toronto, in 1915, he started working as a clerk at the Imperial Bank of Commerce. He studied English and Philosophy part time at the, University of Toronto and completed B.A. there in 1982. In 1983, he wrote his first short story, “One Sunday”, which won the Hart House Prize that year in a literary contest at the University of Toronto. He won this award again in 1984, this time 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’ to devote himself full time to writing,’ He ‘sometimes tells curiously about his last name that it means “Craftsman” or “Artisan” in India. The short stories he published in various Canadian magazines were well-received by many reviewers, including the Toronto Star critic, Ken Adachi, who wrote most enthusiastically about the then unknown writer. 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 United States under the new title Swimming Lessons and other Stories from Firozsha Baag. The book was very well reviewed in
British and North American Journals and was short listed for Canada’s Governor-Generals Award.

Mistry and his wife had lived in and around Toronto since their arrival there in 1975. But, during 1986-87, they spent one year in Long Beach, California, where she taught high school in a racially mixed, middle class neighbourhood. The gang violence they witnessed there has coloured Mistry’s views of American life in general.

“I think I prefer [the Canadian] Multiculturalism to the direct racism of the [American] Melting Pot because I’d rather be alive and face the subtle discrimination. The overt racism of the Melting Pot often leads to a violent end” [Hancock: 145].

So, Mistry likes it in Canada, and lives there in a unliterary, uninspiring, Brampton –

“a wasteland of Subdivisions, shopping malls, light and heavy industry, and miles of franchise glitter.” [145]

According to Hancock, he likes living in Brampton on a quiet street where he practices his craft most of the day in an almost vacant house, while his wife teaches in a local high school.

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 to general critical acclaim. At the post awards luncheon in Toronto in December 1991, the grave and soft spoken, author dealt most patiently with long lines of admires and told reporters that he had no special celebratory plans. He said –

“As soon as this is over, I’m going home to Brampton to write basically.” [Globe and Mail, December 4, 1991, 18]
In March 1992, Such a Long Journey also received the Smith Book / Books in Canada First Novel Award. His second novel *A Fine Balance* [1995] won Canada’s Giller Prize, The commonwealth writers’ award and the Los Angeles Times Book Award. It was nominated for the IMPAC Dublin Literary Award and was in final list for the Booker Prize. *Family Matters* [2002] won the Kiriyam Pacific Rim Book Prize for Fiction, The Canadian Authors Associations MOSAID Technologies mc, Award for Fiction and the Regional Commonwealth Writer Prize for Best Book. It was nominated for the Booker Prize and short-listed for the international IMPAC Dublin Literary Award.

According to an interview, he gave to Vol Ross [*Globe and Mail*: Nov. 30, 1991]. He begins to work each day at 8:30 or 9 a.m. 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. He reads magazines for half an hour, and then works through the afternoon. He wrote his first novel in three drafts. He and his wife enjoy gardening and have a special interest in growing roses. He reads middle-brow magazines, Times and MacLean’s. He does not want to talk about what he does not read. “I must be careful, this is how one makes enemies,” he laughs gently. He speaks Gujrati, Hindi and a bit of Marathi, but as he says, “English is technically my mother tongue”. After telling the interviewer that his next book too will be set in Bombay, Mistry, now a Canadian citizen adds, “I’ll write a novel set in Canada if it comes to me. I have no policies on this.” According to Mistry, his parents -father works in advertising and mother is a housewife - were “thrilled when I said I’d become a writer - they’ve always loved the arts.” He immigrated to Canada, because his wife had family there. Also, in 1975, Australia was racist, America was not too inviting with Vietnam and all that rubbish and England was not England anymore. The interview found Mistry “The soul of gravity,” nothing that it was both
improbable and inevitable [that] a rich novel with all its despairing revolting and glorious passage should have been written by such a quiet gentleman. Rohinton Mistry’s *Tales from Firozsha Baag* [1987], *Such a Long Journey* [1991], *A Fine Balance* [1995] and *Family Matters* [2002] are widely acclaimed.

Perhaps the most important point to make about Mistry’s overwhelming success, though, is that it has allowed him to mediate Parsi culture and represent the Parsi dilemma to an international readership in a way that might not have been possible, had he stayed in Bombay where following his creative inclinations would have been more difficult. Depending on one’s perspective, the trajectory of Mistry’s life and his art can be seen either as reflecting that decline or as countering it. Mistry grew up in a Parsi Baag in Bombay [now Mumbai]. The Parsi Baag or colony is a distinctive feature of the Bombay cityscape, an apartment complex, usually with a community courtyard, that signals the cultural and religious affiliations its inhabitants, at once unifying and isolating, as Mistry’s fiction attests.

His short story collection, *Tales from Firozsha Baag* is remarkable for its representation of the Parsi dilemma. The intersecting short stories of the sequence have two primary settings, Bombay and Canada. As such the stories might be divided into two categories, Indian stories and migration/transcultural stories, though the boundaries between the two categories are often blurred within the stories themselves. The first story, “Auspicious Occasion” is characteristic of the Indian stories in its representation of the precarious position of Parsis in the post colony. Its two main characters, Mehroo and her husband Rustomji, both deal with the anxieties caused by Parsi disenfranchisement: Mehroo’s anxiety manifests itself in her fears concerning a violent act against a Parsi Dustoor or priest; Rustomji’s, when he is forced to play the clown
to ‘avoid violence after he forgets his position in Independent India and insults a crowd of Hindus.

Perhaps the best of the Indian stories is “The Collectors”, the story of an unusual relationship between a young Parsi boy, Jehangir, and one of the most respected members of the Baag, Dr Mody. In this story Parsi anxieties manifest themselves on the level of interpersonal relationships within the community itself. Dr Mody tries to address Jehangir’s need for enfranchisement within the community of the Baag by introducing the boy to his hobby, stamp collecting. The metaphor of stamp collecting in this social context embodies, among other things, Dr Mody’s desire for and idealisation of other places, highlighting Parsi feelings of isolation and disenfranchisement as an impetus for emigration.

The two best stories in the collection, “Squatter”, and “Swimming Lessons”, both reveal what happens when Parsi desires for emigration are realised. “Squatter” is a hilariously self reflexive narrative about the Parsi community’s anxieties over emigration. Within a framing narrative, 13aag storyteller Nariman Hansotia tells a cautionary tale about Sarosh, a man who promised his mother he would completely assimilate into Canada within ten years or return to Bombay. Sarosh is successful in 41 but one way: be cannot evacuate while sitting on a Canadian toilet and must instead squat to achieve his desired catharsis. The story’s clever association of evacuation practices with territorial issues reveals the extremity of Parsi disenfranchisement: as a Parsi, Sarosh is a squatter on Indian Territory and he identifies himself as an Indian squatter on Canadian territory because he evacuates in the Indian way. Of course, the carnivalesque humour of Sarosh’s situation also gives readers cause to see those anxieties as ridiculous, products of an overweening need for enfranchisement. The last story of the collection, “Swimming Lessons”, suggests self-reflexively how stories, writing itself, might be a way of dealing with Parsi
anxieties. The unnamed migrant narrator of this story learns to survive - to swim literally and metaphorically - in Canada, but he does so by writing about his home, ‘renegotiating his relationship to the Parsi culture he has left behind through his narrative. The stories of Firozsha Baag, along with the ensuing novels, might well be read as Mistry’s renegotiations of his own relationship to Parsi culture.

Mistry’s first novel, Such a Long Journey seems to take a departure from Tales from Firozsha Baag in its historic aspect of the Parsi predicament and in its use of the broader political turmoil of India in 1971 as a context for a story about a Parsi family. This novel ties the concerns of the Indian nation to the particular concerns of Parsi protagonist Gustad Noble, who aspires to maintain some semblance of order in his family and his neighbourhood amidst the chaos created by state corruption and an Indo-Pakistani war. Gustad’s family, like the nation itself, seems to be on the verge of disintegrating: he disowns his oldest son, Sohrab, when he refuses to attend the Indian Institute of Technology, electing instead to study literature; he contends with the physical illness of his daughter, Roshan, who becomes ill, he feels, because one of the walls of his building is used as a common latrine by passers-by, creating a cesspool in his family’s backyard; and he unwittingly gets himself involved in illegal’ activities, laundering money through his bank, purportedly to support the aspirations of East Pakistan, but actually as part of an. elaborate embezzlement scheme by Indian government officials. Gustad attempts to remedy these problems on his own lead to tragedy, but also to a better understanding of his relationship to his community, both local and national. Through Gustad’s developing understanding of his own position in the Indian community, Mistry breaks down social boundaries between minority and majority cultures, yoking the particular concerns of the Parsi community to the national concerns of the majority and emphasising somewhat, idealistically that the
solution to problems in both communities can be found in an acceptance of difference and an appreciation of basic humanity.

His next novel, *A Fine Balance* develops the relationship between Parsi and Hindi communities further, linking the disenfranchised of both communities in a cycle of pain and suffering caused by social, political, and economic strife. Like its predecessor, *A Fine Balance* has a fairly precise historical context, much of it revolving around the state of Emergency declared by Indira Gandhi and the Congress Party in 1975 as in the first novel, the problems of the nation as a whole trickle down to overwhelm those least able to deal with them. The novel focuses on four disenfranchised characters: Dina, a Parsi woman who tries to maintain her financial independence from her family; Maneck, a Parsi student; sent to the city by his parents to study engineering, against his own inclinations; and Ishvar and Omprakash, two untouchable Hindu leatherworker cum-tailors who try to escape the caste system by moving to the city.

Hardship brings this unlikely group together under Dina’s roof, and the same hardship eventually tears them apart. However, the bonds of love that grow while they rely on each other for survival endure when the combined brutality of the caste, economics and political systems separates them. Those bonds allow Dina and the tailors - if not Maneck, who commits suicide - to survive the brutish circumstances in which they ultimately live, Dina as a servant to her domineering brother and sister-in-law, and Ishvar and Omprakash as crippled beggars. Though the novel ends tragically, it also ends by celebrating the basic humanity of characters who can get beyond cultural constraints to imagine and create new communities outside established boundaries.

In his third novel, *Family Matters*, Mistry returns to scrutinising the dilemma of the Parsi community in Bombay in a way reminiscent of *Tales from Firozsha Baag*, but informed by the
vision of *A Fine Balance*. This novel treats directly Parsi anxieties concerning emigration, cross-cultural marriages, and declining birth rates [at times citing statistics] and seems ultimately to connect these anxieties to a failure of the imagination: that is, the failure to imagine a new kind of Parsi community, one better integrated in Indian life and not so absorbed in issues of cultural purity. The story revolves around seventy-nine-year-old Nariman Vakeel, a former professor of English whose health is degenerating as a result of Parkinson's. Nariman’s youthful love affair with a Hindu woman which led inadvertently to the death of the Parsi wife, his parents pressured him to marry, haunts him in his declining years and sours his relationship with his morally censorious step-children, Coomy and Jal, who are also his primary caregivers. When they successfully execute a plan to move the burden to his natural daughter, Roxana, her family is forced to adjust their lives and their already strapped finances to his care.

Despite the increasing difficulties Roxana’s family faces and the hardships resulting from ill-hatched plans to remedy them, the shift to their household is a moment of potential, a move away from a site ruled by strict protocols of behaviour, to a site ruled by natural familial love and a concomitant sense of communal responsibility. However, the end of the novel contains that moment of potential when Roxana’s husband Yezad tries to escape his feelings of guilt over the death of his beloved Hindu employer while retreating into his religion. This escape from emotion and responsibility re-invokes the rule of strict Parsi protocol and is complemented by the family’s shift with Nariman back to his original home, the site of so much sadness- and tragedy. In this novel’s ending, Mistry draws a contrast between the potential of the Parsi community to reimagining itself and survive and the wilful-blindness that could spell its end.
For the most part Mistry’s work has been very well received by critics. However, it has also generated some controversy, both inside and outside India. Like Jewish Canadian writer, Mordicai Richler, who provoked the ire of his community through his representations, Mistry has provoked the Parsi community with his sometimes biting representations of the Parsi life in Bombay. Other Critics from outside of India - both Indian and non-Indian - have also faulted him for his representations of India and Indians in general. Perhaps the most controversial criticism was launched against A Fine Balance by Australian feminist critic, Germain Greer. After proclaiming her absolute hatred for the book, Greer faulted Mistry for not representing Bombay realistically:

“I just don’t recognize this dismal, dreary city it’s a Canadian book about India. What could be worse? What could be more terrible?” [146]

Mistry’s response was two-pronged. First, he publicly questioned whether Greer’s four month stint teaching upper-class women in Bombay qualified her to make such a sweeping judgement of his representations. Then he responded by satirizing the incident and ridiculing such western reactions in Family Matters.

Greer’s reaction to Mistry’s representations highlights another issue, the fact that he writes in a traditional realist mode at a time when magic realism seems to be in vogue in postcolonial writing, and criticism on that writing. His writing is intensely realistic, intensely descriptive - which in part might explain the reaction of his critics. Details of daily life and the cultural particularities of Parsi faith are often interwoven with representations of squalor, brutality, sexuality, and bodily functions. Given his realistic representations of the latter, one might be tempted to compare him with V. S. Naipaul, who, in An Area of Darkness, seemed to equate public manifestations of bodily functions in India with moral and social depravity of the people. However, such a reading ignores the carnival sequel elements of
Mistry’s fiction, the fact that bodily functions often hold regenerative potential; and cultural regeneration does seem to an imperative of his writing. Unsophisticated readings of his representations, tied in this case to a scholarly bias against his chosen mode of representation, might explain why, to date, so little scholarly work has been dedicated to the study of his literature despite his critical and popular reception.

A large number of critical responses to Mistry’s fiction are very positive. Keith Garebian has seen his short-story collection as the first among works of short fiction to express the Parsi sensibility. Bindu Malieckal in an in-depth study grouped Mistry’s work in Parsi history, folklore and social statistics. Nilufer Bharucha also contextualizes Mistry’s fiction in the context of the Parsi diaspora. Robert Ross rejects this minimalism by reducing Mistry into a chronicler of Parsi life. Some critics also made comparison of his narrative styles to the classical novelists. For example, Hilary Mental sees A Fine Balance as –

“an intensely angry book, a political novel that pulls no punches,” [3]

that works with cyclical patterns of disaster in which Mistry has trapped his characters.” Sharmani Patricia-Gabriel suggests that A Fine Balance appears to have been influenced by the narrative concerns of nineteenth century European social realism in its power of detail and intensity of engagement. Amin Malak looks at ‘The Shahrazadic tradition’ in Mistry. This is also acknowledged by the critic Arun Mukherjee who argues that –

“to do full justice to Such a Long Journey, it is important to know the history of the Parsi community.” [3-4]

In his novels, Mistry has ideological concerns, which make him one of the foremost Indian English political novelists of the 1990s. His writing concerns people who try to find self-worth while dealing
with painful family dynamics and difficult social and political
contRAINTS. His work also addresses immigration, especially
immigration to Canada, and the difficulty immigrants’ face in a
society. Some critics pointed out his inability in portraying the
typical complex women characters. [Bhautoo-Dewnarain: 3-4]

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political constraints. His work also addresses immigration,
especially immigration to Canada, and the difficulty immigrants’
face in a society. The manner in which the characters and events are
skilfully linked together to run into a stream of stories brings Mistry
very close to Chaucer. In his vision of life also Mistry, like the
Greeks, believes that the malignant power and the Immanent will
stand firmly against the plans of the frail and feeble creature called
man. Like Hardy, he also opines that man is bound to the wheel of
destiny. But the message conveyed by him is not that of a pessimist;
rather it is that of a melliorist. Though Mistry shows a
consciousness for political social and historical events of a
particular time of India and its event, he is not a political or social
propagandist like Shaw; he emerges as a, progressive writer.

Thus we can say that Mistry tries to evolve the Indian image
objectively. He, emphasizing the defect of vision, the racial sense
and the symbolic actions of Indians, also narrates the mental
conflicts and confusions. Mistry’s works, pregnant with
autobiographical undertones, examines not only the colonial
background of India but also the Post-independence Emergency
period. He also focuses on the Indo-China and Indo-Pak wars and
the religious sentiments and superstitions. It is noteworthy that
Mistry also encounters the age-old culture and civilization of Indian
sub-continent and views profoundly the dramatic changes occurring

A Ph.D. Thesis, Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Marathwada University, Aurangabad
in, the social, political and cultural atmosphere of India. It is Mistry’s unmistakable yearning to go back to his roots nostalgically that finds its multiple expressions in his fiction and short stories. In his writings, he desires to go back to his roots and during the course of narration.

Mistry also images India in its multifaceted complexities and realities. He perceives India minutely with a critical viewpoint in his works. Though he is not settled in India and is an expatriate writer, yet he visited India many a time to give his imaginations and perceptions a concrete shape. While dismissing Indian way of life, he has criticized many persons and issues, their lack of vision, people’s nostalgia for Indian culture and civilization, various religious concepts and their negative and positive effects on Indian masses.

Mistry’s works, which include short stories and novels, describe the middle-class Parsi life how it struggles between modernity and tradition. His Tales from Firozsha Baag, a collection of short stories, consisting of eleven intersecting stories, has portraits of the lives of the members of the fictitious residential block Firozsha Baag. Here the characters represent Parsis at odds with their religious beliefs and the larger community. They also convey the common human issues of spiritual, questions, alienation, fear of death, family problems, and economic hardships. In short, the stories give an account of painful family dynamics. His “Auspicious Occasion” is an expression of an unmatched relationship. In the story, Mehroo, who is on her prime, is a thirty years old woman while Rustomji, her husband is fifty. She was married off to this thirty-six-year old Bombay lawyer while she was a mere girl of sixteen, before completing her final high school year. Then Rustomji was considered to be a fine match by Mehro’s parents. But after the due course of time, now the things are reversed.
He treats his wife like a servant. He shouts at her for petty things. Even when he needs his newspaper, he shouts –

“You are deaf or what? Must I scream till my lungs burst?” [4]

No mention is ever made of love between Rustomji and Mehroo. Mehroo treats his husband as if he were her father or her brother. She hunts out his newspaper, cooks and prepares drinks for him; a fraternal affection links them together. They lead a monotonous existence; each day is no different to the next. Thus, Mistry underlines the completeness of the incompatibility between these couples.

The story also depicts another aspect of man-woman relationship in which a woman is treated as an object of sex. This can be exemplified through the first encounter of Rustomji with Gajra, his new maid servant. When Rustomji first sees her, he visually indulges himself. This old toothless man fantasises about her naked body and pays very close attention to her ‘independent’ breasts that are ill-contained by a flimsy sari blouse. In the society, a woman like Gajra is an ideal woman for a man like Rustomji as she is socially inferior. He watches her lustfully and secretly dreams of seducing her. Rustomji watches the Gunga’s voluptuous body, wanting to see her nipples, her breasts in their entirety.

“Dada Ormuzd, just once let me see them, only once.” [10]

His depravity is equalled only by the Parsi priest, Dhunjisha, who excels at sordidness and licentiousness. Mistry, by dint of his highly comic digressions which act like theatrical asides, reveals the real deceptive nature of what are believed to be chaste holy men,

“known to exchange lewd remarks between lines of prayer: Ashem, Vaboo, See the tits on that chickie-boa.” [3]
Mistry’s another short story “The Ghost of Firozsha Baag” is an expression of otherness. In the story one says, “I always believed in ghosts.” [43] By the end of the tale, the actual bhoot has made several appearances, but only the reader is aware of this, and only then if we choose to believe his narrative. In a way, it presents a precursor of more deep-seated ideas of otherness. Jaakaylee is a Catholic, “with very dark skin” [46] amongst the Parsis; that, in fact, is how her name is bastardised from Jacqueline.

“Easy chair was igeechur, French beans was ferach beech. Later, I found out that all Parsis did this, it was like they made their own private language.” [44]

It is another, impenetrable system, through which perhaps the earlier Parsis have sought to align themselves with the ruling British, that remains closed to Jaakaylee. Her re-naming, her bastardisation is important. Names have become the anchor of existence, small signs that pinpoint identity; Lacan labels this whole system of identity as accessed through language acquisition Nom du Pere [Name of the Father]: the acquisition of language, and the attainment of the patriarchal order and social and personal identity.

In denying her name, Jaakaylee is reduced at times even to the inhuman Jaakaylee, phonetically similar to Jackal. In “Forgetting my name, language, my songs”, [45] Jaakaylee is herself forgotten. “Ayah means living close to the floor,” [43] and it is as Ayab that Jaakaylee is known. She lives close to the floor, and sleeps beyond the door, working like an automaton without recognition. She states that bai and seth are wealthy, but they will not spend money on an automatic grinder; they choose to see their servant as the automatic grinder, performing at the snap of their fingers.

Jaakaylee’s story ends with one final supernatural occurrence, and given her fright, this manifestation perhaps holds
more weight than the sexual projection of the narrative. Moreover, it is through this final of the ghosts of Firozsha Baag that something is redeemed in the relationship between Parsi / pseudo-British ruler and the dark, Catholic, Goan ayah. Two women, otherwise separated by their respective social positions of ayah and bai are able to share first the knowledge of the ghost, and second something almost akin to sisterhood.

“The Collectors” is another important story of Mistry in which there is a painful dynamics between father-son. It so happens in the story that Dr. Burjor Mody is transferred from Mysore to assume the principalship of the Bombay Veterinary College, he moves into Firozsha Baag with his wife and son Pesi. They occupy a flat in C Block. Soon Dr. Burjor Mody becomes the leading personality of C Block. Dr. Burjor Mody is very fond of stamp collecting. But, Pesi does not take interest in this hobby. Pesi becomes the point of despair wherever they go. Over the years Dr. Mody finds himself inured to the initial embarrassment in each new place they move to.

Dr. Burjor Mody was very, ambitious about his son. He has decided that his son will play violin, acquire the best from the cultures of East and’ west and he will introduce him to his dearest activity, stamp collection. Dr. Burjor Mody talks about stamp collecting.

“Pesi laughed and mocked his beloved bobby. This’ was the point at which, hurt and confused, he surrendered his son to whatever destiny was in store.” [82]

This is’ not all. Everything that the son does upsets the father –

“Dr. Mody’s constant sorrow and despair which he had tried so hard to keep private all along, and had succeeded, but was now visible for ‘all to see’.” [98]
The kind of relationship between father and son embitters the former so much so that he dies of heart attack. Thus, the relationship between father and son had been ended in despair.

Mistry’s ‘Condolence Visit’ is a painful, story of a wife whose husband has died. It paints Daulat’s ‘grief over her husband Minocher’s death after a prolonged illness. Born and brought up in Firozsha Baag, Daulat and Minocher were the only childhood sweethearts who had got married; all the others had gone their separate ways. But as ‘the title suggests in story, Daulat is waiting for the visitors who would come to offer their condolence, share her grief and Minocher’s with a thousand questions. After a long ‘and troubled illness, Daulat’s husband, Minocher had died. Minocher Mirza ‘had been well known in the Parsi community of Bombay. So the condolence visitors would come like swarms. Daulat had prepared herself to face ‘the situation. But she wanted to escape:

“The only way out was to lock up the flat and leave Firozsha Baag, live elsewhere for the next few weeks.” [60]

No one can, understand the problems of Daulat and each visitor asks silly question about ‘the illness, about doctors and hospitals, about nurses and medicines and Daulat repeats answers. Daulat now remember her nephew Sarosh whom she did not let his new tape-recorder saying –

“Poor Minocher sick in bed, and I listen to music? Never!” [60]

In arming herself for the expected stream of condoling friends and relatives, she wishes now that she ‘had accepted the gift of a, cassette player from her nephew, Sid-Sarosh, and enjoys imagining the answers she would have recorded for them. She would tape her voice, and suffering in tape recorder and offer it to the condolence visitors:
“You have come to ask about my life, my suffering, my sorrow? Here, take and listen. Listen on the machine, everything is on tape.’ How my, Minocher fell sick, where it started to pain, how much it hurt, what doctor said, what specialist said, what happened in hospital.” [61]

It is upsetting for the wife to face the responses of the visitors. Her neighbour Najamai, the only resident of the Baag gave her counselling service to Daulat for completion of the Death Rituals. She also offered cold-drink bottles of Limca and Goldspot for visitors coming after Minocher’s dusmoo. But Daulat thought –

“What does she think, I’m giving a party the day after dusmoo?” [64]

In the old days when Daulat’s grandmother had died music is strictly prohibited there. The radio, gramophone and tape recorder was not allowed in the house for three months. Even all the residents of Firozsha Baag could not play music for one month. The boys of Firozsha Baag could not play their games for One month. It is because of this month several boys get the ‘Membership in Cawasji Framji Memorial Library’ and converted themselves to reading. But now the condolence visitors come to perform their duties. Even they do –

“not know whether to laugh or keep the condolence visit grimness upon their faces.” [70]

Daulat’s experience with her cousin, Moti, is worthnoting. She all the time remains busy in her own world other than that of condolence. She had her two grandsons on this visit. She had instructed them not to drink all cold drink but leave some in glass. If you will drink it all, you will get punishment. After asking some questions about Minocher’s death, she narrates the events of lively nature with no sign of condolence.
Thus, in “Condolence Visit”, Mistry expresses such type of dynamics which becomes painful because of formal behaviour. It is because of this behaviour that Daulat, against the pious objections of a distant visiting cousin and her prying neighbour Nijamai, gives the pugree to a Parsi young man who expects to have a traditional wedding soon. This action of hers privileges her desire to deal with her grief in her own way and not according to societal rules.

The short story, “The Exercisers” is an example of a degenerated relationship between a mother, and her son. Mrs. Bulsara is the castrating mother per excellence. She manages to ruin the innocent love between her son, Jehangir and his girl friend, Dehro. This she does through emotional blackmail, trenchant sarcasm and a mystical subterfuge: she hires the services of a guru to make Jehangir believe that Behroze is trying to trap him through seduction, and that Behroze will thwart his ambitions. To her, the girl friend of his son is nothing but a whore. She says:

“That his girl friend, as far as she could see, was nothing but a slut.” [315]

Thus, Mrs Bulsara’s obsession kills a completely innocent love. It so happens that Mrs Bulsara becomes pathologically jealous of Behroze. Her behaviour is that of a mentally unstable woman as she is always concerned with the sexual life of her son. The mother’s obsession culminates when Jehangir surprises her examining the gusset of his trousers: “Mother was...sniffing, scrutinizing the gusset under the light... [316]. She is caught unaware, looking for powdery stains which might attest to the sexual relations between Jehangir and his girl friend. Even at this point, such is the hold that his mother has upon him that Jehangir does not violently confront her, choosing only mild lily-livered sarcasm as a riposte. He could Jehangir defy the woman who gave up so much in order to enable her son to enjoy the spoils of her sacrifices?
A Fine Balance, like Such a Long Journey, is concerned with life worlds deprived of meaning. First of all, Mistry’s second novel is narrated in a more traditional way. If Such a Long Journey displays elements of magic realism, A Fine Balance is a traditional realist novel. Secondly, the scope of Mistry’s second novel is broader, while his debut is in the main concerned with the Parsis of Bombay, A Fine Balance transcends the narrow confines of the Parsi community and features Parsis, Hindus, Muslims as well as Sikhs. Finally, A Fine Balance underlines the central importance of tolerance and solidarity, thereby echoing Such a Long Journey. Mistry’s second novel enacts transculturalism and intercultural understanding as ways of constructing an identity and as remedies against a reality that is felt to be deprived of meaning.

How social conditions affect the middle class and the marginalized community is highlighted in a realistic manner in the novel. The lives of four main characters namely, Dina Dalal, Ishvar Darji, Omprakash Darji and Maneck Kohiali, are interwoven, who try to overcome their hurdles but fail to maintain a fine balance. It is a conscious effort to embrace more of the social reality of India:

“Holding this book in your hand, sinking back in your soft armchairs, you will say to yourself perhaps it will amuse me. And after you have read this story of great misfortunes, you will no doubt dine well, blaming the author for your own insensitivity, accusing him of wild exaggeration and flights of fancy. But be assured this tragedy is not fiction. All is true.” [1]

The Hindus Omprakash and Ishvar Darji occupy prominent positions in A Fine Balance in so far as both are crucial in illustrating the novel’s central concern of ‘bow to make life liveable under unfavourable conditions and adverse circumstances. Apart from the fatal impact of political forces during the Emergency, one aspect is of particular importance in this context:
“India’s cruelest social constraint caste.”
[Genetsch: 202-203]

The Hindu family saga of A Fine Balance originates with Dukhi Mochi, Ishvar’s father and Omprakash’s grandfather. Dukhi Mochi belongs to the Chamaar caste of tanners and leather-workers. Together with the other chamaars in the village, Dukhi lives on the carcasses of dead animals, the hides of which he receives in order to produce sandals and harnesses. His social status is that of an untouchable. All such, he does not formally belong to any of the four main castes of Hindu society, i.e.

“Brahmins [priests], Kshatriyas [warriors], Vaishyas [traders and peasants] and Shudras [craftsmen and servants],” [106]

Untouchability is a stigma; other castes avoid contact with Dukhi because he is deemed impure.

Hinduism explains caste by recourse to the concept of karma while the Hindu believes that his position within - the caste system is determined by his behaviour in a previous incarnation. A reincarnation ‘as a Brahmin, for instance, is taken as a sign that one has acted in accordance with his duties as representative of his respective, caste. The system of caste postpones social mobility to a future incarnation. A future incarnation, however, will only bring about a rise to another stratum if the individual conforms to his present caste status. Thus the social status quo is not to be questioned; paradoxically, it better be affirmed,

“if the individual wants to improve his standing’ in life.” [Genetsch: 203]

It is crucial to realise that Mistry’s portrayal of Hindu culture is not an impartial ethnographic account of Indian society. He suggests that stark injustices are inherent in the practice of caste. The inhumanity of untouchability is severely criticized as a contributing to an erosion of meaning in the lives of Dukhi,
Narayan, Ishvar and Om. [Genetsch: 203] An example for the cruelty and arbitrariness that characterises their treatment by their betters is illustrated in the following way:

“For walking on the upper-caste side of the street, Sita was stoned though no death - the stones had ceased at first blood. Gambhir was less fortunate. He had molten lead poured into his ears because he ventured within hearing range of the temple while prayers were in progress. Dayaram, reneging on an -agreement plough a - landlord’s field, had been forced to eat the landlord’s excrement in the village square. Dhiraj tried to negotiate in advance with Pandit Ghanshyam the wages for chopping wood, instead of setting for the few sticks he could expect at the end of the day; the Pandit got upset, accused Dhiraj of poisoning his cows, and had him hanged.” [108-9]

The novel repeatedly unfolds the cruelty shown to the outcaste people. As a result, they feel that their fate is to bear injustice: The children of outcaste people are beaten for no valid reason. For example, they are beaten up for entering the village school. Though it is said that –

“even an untouchable could receive justice at his hands.” [112]

But it is a just a facade. Dukhi, an outcaste, realizes that justice is a concept which an untouchable does not have a claim to. Being outside society, Dukhi is also considered outside the scope of justice. Mistry’s portrayal satirises Pandit Lalluram as an unmannered, gluttonous reactionary who is not interested in justice for all:

Relying on this legendary reputation for justice, Dukhi sat at Pandit Lalluram’s feet and told him about the beating of Ishvar and Narayan. The learned man was resting in an armchair, having just finished his dinner, and belched loudly several times during his visitor’s narration. Dukhi paused politely at each eructation, while
Pandit Lalluram murmured ‘Hai Ram’ in thanks for an alimentary tract blessed with such energetic powers of digestion. [112]

The injustice done to Ishvar and Narayan and their futile appeal to justice deprive Dukhi of satisfaction with the life he leading is an untouchable. Because the system disregards his hope of transcending himself in his children, Dukhi, for the first time in his life, questions his identification with the order of caste. He revolts, and eventually transgresses the restrictions of caste, a reaction that becomes manifest in the decision –

“to remove his sons from the impact of discrimination.” [Genetsch: 204-205]

The outcaste people try to fight this injustice. While his father opposed occupational restrictions based on caste, Narayan fights for the constitutionally guaranteed political participation of untouchables in the election process. Although his father warns him that he will risk his life, Narayan complains about a life not worth living. He testifies to an erosion of meaning when he laments that “life without dignity is worthless.” [144] By taking on the fight against the corruption and the nepotism of the parliamentary elections Narayan takes on the fight against an existence deprived of dignity. Narayan’s failure and his tragic death in the course of a futile attempt to fight the caste system and its political practice are foreshadowed in an early passage:

“By and by she [Radha, Narayan’s wife] brought a lamp to the porch. Within seconds it attracted a cluster of midges. Then a brown moth arrived to keep, its assignation with the light. Dukhi watched it try to beat its fragile wings through the lamp glass.” [143]

Here the moth’s futile attempt to reach the light is symbolic of Narayan’s endeavour to break, with traditional caste regulations. Narayan disregards the invisible boundaries of caste in a way
resembling the moth that does not realise that there is a boundary between itself and the light.

Farokh Kohlah’s life is again a tale of sufferings caused by the so called advancement of life. He owns a shop in the Mountains of North India. Maneck, his son, attends the local school and helps his father in the evenings. He identifies with the rural area. His father’s job and wants to continue his father’s business after his retirement. Initially, his wish is not met with impediments, for Farokh agrees that –

“nowhere else can Maneck have better expectations for his future.” [210]

However, he sends his son out from, the village for education. Although Farokh Kohlah only wants the best for his son, i.e. a better education than the ‘village school can offer, his decision to send him to a boarding school is a catastrophe for Maneck, as the following quote illustrates:

The boarding school they selected was eight hours away by bus. Maneck detested the decision. The thought of leaving the hill-station - his entire universe - brought him to a state of panic.

“I like my school here,” he pleaded. “And bow will I work in the shop in the evening if you send me away?” [211]

Maneck feels an “ache of betrayal” [211] when he learns of his father’s plans for him. He feels cheated by a father assumed to be reliable and loving. His father’s breach of faith, as well as the loss of satisfaction hitherto ‘gained from working in the shop, contributes to the collapse of the ordered universe, of his childhood. As consequence, Maneck is faced with “despair,” “rejection” and “loneliness”, [213] all of which result in an alienation from his family. [Genetsch: 211]
As far as the ambience of Farokh’s world is concerned, it is abruptly changed, too, by the intrusion of multinational companies. The ensuing competition with foreign products destroys his soft-drink business. Eventually Kohlah’s cola cannot prevail over ‘Coca-Cola’s marketing strategy. Moreover, the growing industrialization leads to the ecological denudation of the Himalayas and destroys the pastoral’ nature of the hillsides. Farokh is confirmed in his belief that there is no future for his son in mountains either:

“The slow coach gets left behind,” he answered, ‘And I don’t want the same thing happen to Maneck.” [221]

Consequently, he does not want his son to return to the village after secondary school but is determined to send Maneck even further away. While Farokh is afraid that Maneck could become a ‘slow coach’ Maneck eventually ends his life by throwing ‘train, thereby testifying that Farokh has tragically misjudged his son and his needs.

There is also an important character in A Fine Balance, Dina Dalal. The death of Dina’s father, Dr. Shroff by a cobra’s bite intensifies the theme of the novel. His death symbolizes the death of idealism. It becomes more painful when we are encountered with his son, Nusswan After his death, Nusswan presides over the household, whose personality represents the antithesis to his father’s character. Whereas Dr. Shroff actions are motivated by idealism and altruism, Nusswan has internalised a businessman’s pragmatism together with an obsession for power and control. His sister, Dina, becomes the victim of his obsession for power and control. She has to discontinue her school as she is overburdened with the entire household work. Nusswan’s attempts to conform to the role of patrilineal families severely affect his sister’s, peace of mind. The effect of the misery suffered under her brother’s guardianship is that Dina becomes obsessed with the idea of personal freedom. She says –
“No need now to visit her brother and beg for next month’s rent. She took a deep breath. Once again, her fragile independence was preserved” [11]

This is not all as far as Dina’s life is concerned. She becomes all the more tragic after the death of her husband, Rustom. Now ‘her fears of dependence and of loneliness are ‘anchored in this second traumatic experience i.e. ‘the loss of her husband. Rustom’s death haunts Dina’s mind, and it seem that it cannot be compensated His demise confronts Dina with isolation and loneliness, concomitant –

“When the human weight did not materialize, she awakened to emptiness, relearning the loss in the darkness before sunrise.” [47]

Dina Shroff has two conflicting impulses, i.e. her fear of isolation and her misgivings about dependence. While both impulses pose a threat to the source of meaning in her, life, fighting one necessarily favours the other. By fighting isolation, i.e. by investing into, social contacts, Dina has to make a commitment which will affect her independence. Fighting dependence, i.e. maintaining absolute personal independence, on the other hand, might very well, thwart any hope of finding sou1mates. In the course of the, novel, Mistry emphasizes human company as the overriding necessity. Dina longs for a social life because the effects of isolation and loneliness threaten her with disintegration. This is seen in her strong reaction against those who have harmonious relationship. She reacts with jealousy to the gradually developing friendship between Maneck and Om because she herself is “longing for company.” [277] The evenings become the time when “the emptiness of her own life appeared starkest.” [193] She feels lonely when Om and Ishvar have left the flat:

“Soon the evening gloom would materialize, infect the fibre-filled air, drape itself over her
bed, depresses her from now till morning.” [274]

Set in Bombay in the mid-1990s, Family Matters [2002] tells a story of familial love and obligation, of personal and political corruption, of the demands of tradition and the possibilities for compassion. Nariman Vakeel, the widowed patriarch of an extended family lives with his stepdaughter Coomy and stepson Jal in a large flat in politically corrupted city Bombay. His gradually debilitating Parkinson’s disease and a broken ankle cause him to need Coomy and Jal’s help for nearly everything. The plot of the novel is set in Bombay [Mumbai] of the 1990s. Coomy bathes her stepfather begrudgingly twice a week and grimaces when the old man humbly asks for the simplest of human needs; Jal goes along with what his bossy sister thinks is best. Meanwhile, Coomy and Jal’s half-sister - Nariman’s biological daughter, Roxana - lives with her husband and two Sons in the two rooms flat which Nariman purchased as Roxana’s dowry.

When Nariman Vakeel celebrates his seventy-nine birthday Yezad and Roxana bring a walking stick as a gift on the seventy-nine ‘birthday of Nariman. Coomy says that the walking stick is a sign of how inconsiderable you are:

“Never were you like this, not till you got married and left. Now you have no Concern for how we live or die. And that hurts me!” [36]

Nariman complains to Coomy,

“In my youth, my parents controlled me and destroyed those years. Thanks to them, I married your mother and wrecked my middle years. Now you want to torment my old age. I won’t allow it.” [7]

Nariman, in his youth, loved a Christian girl called Lucy. But due to restriction in Parsi religion they could not marry. About eleven
years Nariman and Lucy had planned to create a world for themselves. Lucy called it Cocoon.

“A cocoon was what they needed, she said, into which they could retreat, and after their families had forgotten their existence, they would emerge like two glistering butterflies and fly away together.” [13]

At last, Nariman has to refuse the idea to get marry with Lucy.

Coomy schemes to make sure that Roxana is forced to care for her father, in her tiny flat while she and Jal live in the relatively enormous family apartment, pretending that it is disintegrating and not fit for their father to live in. Nariman, a former professor, says,

“To so many classes I taught Lear, learning nothing myself. What kind of teacher is that, as foolish at the end of his life as at the beginning? Doesn’t worry, this Lear will go home again.” [287]

Roxana is Cordelia to Nariman’s Lear, the most favoured daughter who finds that Coomy, at least, is quite insincere to her father. Indeed, this family has its share of filial ingratitude and betrayal.

In every part of the world, families are making decisions and taking certain degrees of responsibility for their elders. But this story is still utterly Indian and there is no question about whether Mistry is the deserving recipient of the Kiriyama award. While the story of taking ‘care of our’ aging and dying elders is a worldwide issue, the minutia of this family’s daily life is distinctly Indian.

Bombay’s train system, arranged marriages, unending corruption of government, religious discrimination, exploding pressure-cookers full’ of curry, Catholics vs. Non-Catholics in a cricket match, pollution and jewel toned saris, extremists whose goal it is to abolish Valentine’s day and attack Muslims, children escaping into an Enid Blyton book to fantasize about the sort of
British that aren’t even in England. The beauty and the agony of India act almost as another character in the story.

In a recent NPR interview, Mistry states that he has never taken care of a dying parent - surprising after reading the details and humanity of Nariman’s Parkinson’s disease - but relates that having elderly and dying family members in close contact is a way of life when one grows up in India. There simply aren’t many other options if you aren’t wealthy there. And so, while the minutia of a family’s life and struggles, are often mundane, Mistry masterfully weaves a reality that is both compelling and easy to relate to.

Roxana’s husband, Yezad, works for a sporting goods emporium and has, in the past, eloquently written for permission to immigrate his family to Canada. Mistry himself immigrated to Canada some twenty years ago, as part of the nearly subconscious desire in India to find better opportunity in the West. Everyone in Yezad’s family is proud of their Persian heritage and their Persian reputation for honesty and loyalty.

And yet nearly each person in the family is lured by temptation into something illegal to make an extra rupee or two for the family’s monthly budget. One school-aged sort saves his bus fare and walks to and from school; another, the teacher’s pet and Homework Monitor, surprises and disgusts himself by accepting bribes from his classmates: improving their marks and adding to his mother’s grocery and gas funds.

By living with his father-in-law in cramped quarters for several months, Yezad grows from a moody and resentfully uninvolved husband to a sweet and caring son to Nariman. He comments on the beauty of helping the elderly find comfort in their deaths:
“Strange trip, this journey toward death, No way of knowing how much longer for the chief... a year two years? But Roxana was right, helping your elders through it - that was the only way ‘to learn about it. And the trick was to remember it when your own time came...” [310]
WORKS CITED


