

Political turmoil and dominance in Rohinton Mistry's novel, a fine balance

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Abstract

The writings of Rohinton Mistry aim to provide a worldwide view that encompasses both the Parsis' community-centered existence and their participation in the larger national framework. This study primarily focuses on the political aspects found in Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* set in India. In all the novels of Rohinton Mistry, politics plays a significant role to the plot's primary action. The subject matter moves closer as Mistry discusses the liberation of East Pakistan during the 1971 war with Pakistan in *Such a Long Journey*, the effects of Prime Minister's declaration of a State of Emergency, and its impact on the tailors' livelihoods in *A Fine Balance*, and the effects of the Hindu fundamentalist movement and the post-Babri Masjid riots on the lives of common people in *Family Matters*. Mistry uses his characters as his spokesperson to express his opinions on these events. So, the main objective of this study is to draw attention to the political turmoil and domination that common people suffer in Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance*.

Keywords: - Political, Emergency, Liberation, Domination, Common People, Sufferings.

1. Introduction

Rohinton Mistry was born in July 1952 in Mumbai. He is the first Indian author in English who had all of his novels nominated for "The Man Booker Prize". He is a member of the Parsi community and was born and raised in India. Even though Mistry migrated to Canada after leaving India in 1975, he had an extensive knowledge of Indian politics at the time, which was not far removed from reality. His books highlight the everyday activities of Indian politics, including corruption, politically driven schemes, the plights of ordinary people, and the power of dishonest authorities over the oppressed people. Before leaving for Canada, Mistry learned a lot about the socio-political history of his nation during his time in Bombay.

He frequently attempts to rewrite the history of his native country in his writings. In response to a question on why India keeps coming up in his work, he said in an interview "that it is very naïve to assume that you go to a new country and you start a new life and its new chapter-it's not. Canada is the middle of the book. At some point you have to write the beginning? And the beginning has been India". (Rohinton Mistry, *How Memory Lives and Dies*, 14)

A Fine Balance by Rohinton Mistry is set in 1975 in a city by the sea which is clearly Bombay. In the same year that Mistry immigrated to Canada, the political situation in India was at its worst because the Prime Minister, announced a State of Emergency. In contrast with *Such a Long Journey*, his earlier book, *A Fine Balance* goes beyond the parsi realm to discuss the criminalization of politics. Every aspect of human existence and Indian life is presented in the novel, including its people, classes, and their identities. This novel won Mistry the Second Annual Giller Prize in 1996. Additionally, it won the 1996 Los Angeles Times Award for fiction as well as the Winifred Holtby Prize from the Royal Society of Literature.

In this Novel, Ishvar and Omprakash, two tailors, are traveling by train to Widow Dina Dalal's apartment. They also meet Maneck Kohlah, a college student, on the train as he also happens to be travelling to Dina Dalal's apartment to live there. Dina, who comes from a well-to-do family. When she was twelve years old, her father, a doctor by profession, passed away. After her father's demise, Nusswan, Dina's elder brother, took care of Dina because her mother had become aloof. Nusswan was quite harsh towards Dina, making her do all the housework, cooking, and cleaning, and beating her when she disobeyed him. When she reached adulthood, Dina rebelled against Nusswan and his potential suitors for her. Instead, she found her own partner, chemist Rustom Dalal, at a music theatre. However, their good fortune lasts for a short while, as Rustom dies in an accident on their third wedding anniversary. Now Dina Dalal starts with a new journey. She moves into



her late husband's flat and, with the support of Shirin Aunty, begins a career in tailoring. As time goes by, Dina reaches her forties and she gets many sewing projects but her eyes don't support her. Now she needs helping hands hence she is looking for two talented tailors who can work for her. Om and Ishvar Darji are employed for this purpose only. This way Mistry prepares his viewers for the tragic story of the main characters. As the story unfolds, we get to know about the political turmoil and dominance imposed on the lives of the main characters of this novel at the time of Emergency.

Rohinton Mistry established himself as a writer of his own choices and the manner in which he had handled the issues are quite noticeable. The quest for personal identity is one of the highlights in Mistry's work, which is compelled by elements like racism, casteism, class conflict and political issues, etc. Hope and despair are woven within the characters' hopes and dreams of living in the free world. The reality is that Mistry's books are about the outcasts of society, including members of both upper and lower castes. Themes of Rohinton Mistry are specifically belongs to India and are drawn from the Indian history.

In 1977, Mrs. Indira Gandhi called for national elections as a consequence of the political misjudgment. But she did not win. She was re-elected as prime minister in 1984, and at this time, she was assassinated by her own Sikh bodyguards in retaliation for her barbaric military assault on the Golden Temple in Amritsar, which resulted in the deaths of more than 400 Sikhs. These historical details are essential for understanding Mistry's novel *A Fine Balance*. The rivalry between Hindus and Muslims in the book reaches unfathomable heights.

"Communal slaughter at the brand-new border ignited riots everywhere, and sporting a fez in a Hindu neighborhood was as fatal as possessing a foreskin in a Muslim one. In certain areas it was wiser to go bareheaded, for choosing incorrectly among the fez, white cap and turban could mean losing one's head." (*A Fine Balance*, 87)

Thoughtfulness, alienation, diaspora, politics, and reduction are prominent themes in Rohinton Mistry's literature. Such a *Long Journey* by Mistry is a critical work that looks at various aspects of India, including its culture, communities, society, way of life, and the assurance of the Parsi's social status. Mistry accurately recreates the setting of this social gathering and the nation in the post-opportunity era. The paper looks at the experience, hardship, and nostalgic sentiments of the Parsi social class in India after independence.

In his book *A Fine Balance*, Rohinton Mistry captures the realities of India's post-independence politics of debasement, exploitation, dishonesty, and violence. Mistry's strong criticism of social and class inequities has allowed this work to expand the boundaries of contemporary reality. The story also sheds light on the realities of daily life in India by emphasizing lies, cruelty, and the horrifying nature of challenges.

Each character has a tragic story that illustrates the pitiful state of India's marginalized people. Mistry's sympathy for the underprivileged is well expressed throughout the book. Ishvar and Omprakash take their responsibilities quite seriously. Maneck Kohlah is a sincere young man as well. He treats Dina Dalal like a family. Omprakash Darji and his uncle Ishvar are the two tailors who worked for Dina Dalal. Since they did not own any shop, so they had to find a job to meet their livelihood. To make a living, they had traveled from the village to the town. Their only skill was sewing and stitching which earned them a job as tailors, and they are very obedient and serious in their job. They are working day and night, live in the slums, and eventually seek shelter in Dina Dalal's apartment. Unfortunately, the Emergency, took away the happiness from the lives of both of these tailors. The life of the common people had been flipped upside down at the time of emergency.

They had hardly worked at Dina's house for three weeks when problems began. As a consequence of Dina's landlord's issues, she received a warning letter stating that she needed to halt all "commercial activities immediately or face eviction" (Mistry, 1995). It was very difficult for Dina to earn a living by herself so she asked the tailors to keep this job a secret and that they would claim to be her domestic helpers if anybody questioned their presence in the house. Omprakash was upset when Dina has referred Omprakash as a servant. He was upset by all that was going on and wished he had died long ago when his family had been charred to death.

The tailors belonged to a low caste, and Omprakash's father Narayan and Ishvar switched from their family's occupation as cobblers to become tailors. Ishvar planned to go to the city and start a tailoring business there because even if he had built a store in their village, people would not have been able to purchase or pay for their sewing as it would be unaffordable for the people being of that region. He was therefore more inclined to go to the city in search of more possibilities and money. Omprakash was sent along with his uncle Ishvar to become proficient in tailoring. Initially it was very difficult beginning for them in the city because the man who was supposed to support them in the city turned out to be useless himself. He couldn't bear the extra burden of the tailors since he didn't have enough food or room for his own family. Also they were unable to find any employment, so they were forced to search some work to make their living.

The dominant authorities from the higher caste made life tough for lower caste people. Landlords like Thakur Dharamsi supervised elections. In village Ishvar's brother Narayan was tortured to death by the goondas of Thakur Dharamsi as he tried to cast a vote using his rights and attempted to speak out against the unfair voting practices. His home was also burned on fire along with his family members. The top castes continue to exploit the lower castes. Being in the city, only Ishvar and Omprakash survived. Both were imagining about a lovely future in the city, its enormous construction, seeing hundreds of people going for work, and other such ideas.

"In the evening, after the ballot boxes were taken away, burning coals were held to the three men's genitals, then stuffed into their mouths. Their screams were heard through the village until their lips and tongues melted away. The still, silent bodies were taken down from the tree. When they began to stir, the ropes were transferred from their ankles to their necks, and the three were hanged. The bodies were displayed in the village square." *A Fine Balance* pg. 168



Poor and helpless people's life had been made miserable by the Emergency Rules and Regulations, but the police were pleased with it since they had unrestricted power over the helpless people. If anyone was found questioning the Emergency was either assaulted or imprisoned and had to comply with all orders given by the authorities.

When the Prime Minister used to visit a certain location in order to speak to the audience, large numbers of people were forcibly bundled into buses and were also promised food and cash after the PM's speech. Even though it was all a fraud, people were compelled to go or they were warned to face jail. In order to accompany them, Omprakash and Ishvar missed out on their job at Dina's apartment. After the speech, small snacks were provided, but there was a very long line. People were barely receiving a half-cup of tea. And as Om and Ishvar's time approached to get the tea and snacks, the buses prepared to depart. People had to skip the treats and hurried for the buses since they were the only mode of transportation available for taking them back to their homes. Despite a commitment to pay five rupees, everyone was only paid four rupees as they boarded the bus. One rupee was deducted for the tea, snacks, and bus fare. The tailors were very disappointed because a day was wasted and money was also lost as they did not go for work. They were promised to be dropped by bus back to their house, but it left them in the middle of nowhere, forcing them to finish their return journey on foot in the heavy rain. There was no one to hear the people's complaints against this type of injustice, which was being done to them. This incident ironically satirises the misuse of power by the government officials as they are informed to gather audience for the political rally of the Prime Minister. The life of the lower-class people depends on their daily earnings. Due to this compelled engagement in the rally, they have lost their one day's income.

Many people ended up being homeless by the City Beautification Programme, which was also one of the Prime Minister's Emergency's programmes. People living in slums were tricked out of their homes, and afterwards the places they lived were demolished. According to the City Beautification Programme, slums only serve to take away a city's attractiveness. The loss of Omprakash and Ishvar's house depressed them. For a little moment, the bulldozers halted so that families could gather their possessions from their houses.

"They said it's a new Emergency law. If shacks are illegal, they can remove them. The new law says the city must be made beautiful." (A Fine Balance, 342)

During the Emergency, the police possessed absolute control, and no one dared to question or criticize them, no matter whether they were involved in doing wrong or right. The government's worthless policies were responsible for forcing them onto the road. They were forced to spend the night in the railroad station, which was already crowded with homeless people. The tailors could not locate a spot to sleep even the next night. They wandered from street to street looking for refuge, but none could be found. Even the hotels they looked for to stay at were out of their financial capabilities.

A Fine Balance serves as a microcosm of life in general that Mistry specifically encountered while he was in India. His experiences living abroad have inspired him to compare India and Canada in his creative writing. Being a multicultural individual, when his original country is contrasted with a multi-cultural country like Canada, he sees something about it that is really unusual. In order to restore the ethnic identity of his underprivileged town, Rohinton Mistry begins his quest by balancing hope and despair.

The emergency disrupts the lives of all the novel's main characters. In sterilization camps, people were forcibly sent for family planning operations as well as for free medical examinations. Bachelors or even persons who are about to get married are operated on, and sometimes even castrated, at the insistence of powerful individuals at such camps. Many of these people lose their life from illnesses because of the equipment that has either been partially or completely unsterilized. Om and Ishvar became the victim of this scheme. Every officer was convincing individuals to get sterilized in order to fulfil his quota under the new Emergency guidelines; if he didn't, he wouldn't get promoted. Deaths that occurred during the 'Emergency' were called accidents. According to the authorities, Ashraf Chacha's death at the market square was an accident.

But Dina shows her compassion for the underclass by providing home to Ishvar and Om, the two chammaars. She was unable to access the legal system under the "Emergency" due to the untrustworthy authorities like sergeant Kesar. She thus had to balance hope and despair in order to survive. The statement "There is always hope- hope enough to balance our despair or we would be lost" was stated by Mr. Valmiki to Dina Dalal.

The suicide of Avinash's three sisters coincides with the murder of Avinash during the emergency since their father was unable to make arrangements for their dowry.

"The three were sisters, aged fifteen, seventeen, and nineteen, and had hanged themselves while their parents were out of the house. They had written a note to explain their conduct. They knew that their father was unhappy at not being able to afford dowries for them. After much debate and anxiety, they had decided to take this step, to spare their mother and father the shame of three unmarried daughters. They begged their parents' forgiveness for this action which would cause them grief; they could see no alternative." A Fine Balance Pg 682

Mistry seems to be trying to emphasize the scale of the issue by giving the image of poverty, misery, filth, and degradation that permeates the Indian society at such a broad frame. So, A Fine Balance's narrative completes a full circle. The fight Dukhi Chamaar initiated against caste determinism three generations ago is now over. Om is castrated on the command of Thakur Dharamsi due to the caste jealousy, and Ishvar's leg had to be amputated because of the gangrene caused by the insanitary operation that he is forced to undergo because of the sterilization programme. Om and Ishvar's fate are brought down to a damned life to the periphery of society—a life of beggary—in a society like the novel portrays, where the odds are stacked against the poor and the needy.

As the group of four splits up, each person's destiny is determined by politics. Om, Ishwar, and Dina Dalal had to fight for their survival inside the system of societal tyranny they aimed to eliminate. Maneck returns from Dubai during the height



of anti-Sikh riots following the murder of the prime minister by her own bodyguard. Unable to handle the situations, murder of Avinash, his three sister's suicide, fate of Dina Dalal and unbearable circumstances of his friends Om and Ishvar, Maneck commits suicide.

The two tailors had to suffer all their lives but they are not protesting and complaining. They are not thinking about the past or future, they have joyfully handed over themselves in the hands of Almighty. Even if it seems like their efforts are in vain, the characters do show grim determination and strong resistance. Many writers including Rohinton Mistry, favor reality above fantasy.

2. Conclusion

In *A Fine Balance*, Mistry exposes the shocking acts committed against two untouchables from a town as well as the tragic facets of the Parsi socioeconomic class. Mistry uses a woman and three men as the four major characters, along with a large cast of exceptional supporting ones. The protagonists of the four legends each have their own unique narrative, and they all start off living apart on a single city rooftop. The book is a study of the agonies and excruciating experiences of the individuals. After being damaged by an immoral conclusion that upset the harmony of the nation, *A Fine Balance* becomes an indicator to mental toughness and care for the minor. The unsettling conclusion that everyone encounters alters the writer's feeble reaction to the hardship of living through prolonged times of political imbalance.

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Conflict of Interest

The Author's declares that no conflict of interest in this manuscript.

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