

ROHINTON MISTRY'S *A FINE BALANCE*: VOICING THE VOICELESS

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Abstract:

It is rightly said and very deeply believed from generations to generations that literature is reflection of society. The author or writer who is the producer of the literature not only projects the society around him but also comments on it. In the beginning literature was completely devoted to praising the elite thereby the writer established himself the literary world. There came a time, when the writers were generous enough to portray the suffering of the poor. Societies across the world are always structured unfairly and are filled with diverse personalities. Social scientists and political thinkers being very conscious of social disparity through their rich and vast experience, along with creative artists have raised questions and have tried to recommend solutions. India has the nickname "sub-continent" because of its innumerable castes and classes. People are naturally divided in the name of religion and language, region, etc., And such divisions creates disparity among the people by devaluing each other. This paper deals with the human predicament that is distinguishable in Rohinton Mistry's fiction. It is a genuine attempt to explore primarily the conception of human predicament and to explain how it affects the fields of knowledge and religion. The study is especially relevant in the existing situation where many divisions and inconsistencies exist in society on the basis of class, gender and race. As resistance always co-exists with power, whenever power is exercised, people show their resistance and that leads to human predicament.

Keywords: *Indian emergency, Suppression, Downtrodden, Suffering of the poor.*

Mistry projects the emotional life and personal relationships of Parsi's in his fictional works. He presents a fascinating slice of their life. Mistry asserts that Parsi community has retained its ethos and culture in a predominantly Hindu society. It also recommends new ways of belonging and construction of a community in the new borderless space.

Rohinton Mistry considers 'community' as aid for all social changes. His analysis becomes a social appraisal and provides the readers a unique outlook into the functioning of social institutions. Mistry laments on the degeneration of values and condemns the social evils that bring about social disparity in his novel *A Fine Balance*. His ideology is deeply rooted in his faith in humanism. Suppression and oppression of poor by the elite is very common in the contemporary society. In India untouchability and religious intolerance are obvious scenes in day to day life. In the wake of globalization, media have spread awareness and developed human consciousness to new levels. In the novel *A Fine Balance*, Mistry portrays human personalities who are tormented by the socio economic cultural pressures and inspire the individuals to develop an intimate understanding to adopt himself to the social environment. In Mistry's opinion the suppression of the untouchables in the name of caste and religion is inhuman and sordid. He uses history and geography to his convenience in his writings by employing his characters in historical and geographical milieu; Mistry's characters are too real enough to be rejected as fictitious.

Warnock has cited his insight of human predicament on the needs and interests of common man; biologically looking for the fullest contentment but

“there will absolutely be no reason to believe that his total satisfaction, meaning thereby satisfaction of all his needs, wants and interests, is, in any order of priority, even logically possible, let alone practically” (Warnock: www.econ.iastate.edu/).

An atheist existentialist outlook of human predicament is that life is an endless game of life and death. This human predicament keeps both ordinary men and intellectuals constantly striving till the end, the accomplishment of the search. An ordinary man seeks to find his place in society through a sense of contribution or through a sense of achievement. Philosophers always approach the question from a rational point of view. Shandon L. Guthrie says,

“Thus people desire to determine the meaning of their lives and not the mere abstract notion of 'life' as existence” (45)

Robert C. Solomon presents an unambiguous view of the human predicament;

“the irresolvable confusion of the human world, yet resists the all-too-human temptation to resolve the confusion by grasping toward whatever appears or can be made to appear firm or familiar—reason, God, nation, authority, history, work, tradition, or the other worldly, whether of Plato, Christianity or utopian fantasy” (328).

But when certain things slip out of this ideology, the real problems arise. The individual capabilities enable man to pursue a life he values most. The Nobel laureate, Amartya Sen asserts that this is true freedom and should therefore be the focus of all developmental effort.

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In a traditional family harmony prevails, values of compassion are promoted; greed and selfishness are demoted and welfare of others is stressed. Unselfishness is the key to happiness and contentment. However, in this materialistic, capitalist and competitive world keeping a harmonious family is the most difficult task. In order to form a happy and peaceful family, every member has to cultivate the sense sacrifice and contentment.

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Mistry's deep sense of humanism is profusely revealed in the treatment of characters from lower strata. In his opinion wickedness is unknown to the poor. In the novel *A Fine Balance*, in addition to the characters Om and Ishvar who came from the village, there are other characters dwelling in slums doing odd jobs like the monkey man and the hair collector. People scorn beggary, the portrayal of beggars and their miserable life arouses pity and reverence. They are more humane and more sympathetic towards the sufferers than any other human beings. Similarly, Ibrahim, the rent collector is really a pitiable person because he has to follow the command of his owner much against his wishes. Dina's exemplary reaction to the disparity around her, and the lessons of integration she had learnt made her an adorable character. The quilt stitched by Ishvar and Om represents the fragmented community and the quilt of assorted colours, sizes, shapes and textures represent various sections of people. The stitching of differences and disparities of the society is the central motif of the novel. On the other hand the quilt also represents a collective record of the trials, tribulations and triumphs of their lives:

Calling one piece sad is meaningless. See, it is connected to a happy piece-sleeping on the verandah. And the next square-chapattis. Then that violet tusser. When we made masalawada and started cooking together. And don't forget this georgette patch, where Beggar master saved us from the landlord's gonads....So that's the rule to remember, the whole quilt is much more important than any single square. (*A Fine Balance*, 490)

Dina Dalal lived a life of misfortunes yet with dignity, finely balanced between optimism and anguish. *A Fine Balance* is a novel set in a gloomy period of Indian history, which makes it unquestionably a 'fine' novel. He considers literature as an exact medium of promoting humanism in mankind. Ishvar and Om Prakash are characters who can be effortlessly identified with millions of poor in India. The distressing human conditions in which they lived and the human relationships that shaped their course of life are described with a somber touch of realism. Bharucha points out in *Reflections in Broken Mirrors: Diverse Diasporas in Recent Parsi Fiction*,

“This is also the dilemma of most Parsi's, whose diverse diasporas throw back at them fragmented, fractured images whose broken mirrors reflect their once glorious past, their reduced present and their insecure future”. (35)

In the novel, *A Fine Balance* Mistry mixes history with the personal lives of the characters, which is characteristic of an immigrant writer. While dealing with the lives of common people in India, the novel also deals with the socio-political disturbances prevailed in India. The story in *A Fine Balance* moves around Dina Dalal, a widow living alone in the city of Bombay. Maneck Kohlah, a student from a hill side town whose family lost its wealth during the partition of India, was a paying guest of Dina, and the two untouchables, Ishvar Darji and Omprakash Darji were the tailors of Dina. The predicament of these characters is portrayed in the novel.

Rohinton Mistry, the Diasporic writer deals with the migrant experience and his works also depict the experience of Migrancy along with the Parsi culture ethos. Also, an undercurrent of violence - potential or actual runs throughout Mistry's novel. In all cases, the experience of an immigrant related to the power and violence, and Mistry's novel is no exception. In *A Fine Balance*, Mistry presents the cruelties and corruption during Indira Gandhi's time. She declared a 'State of Internal Emergency' and suspended Indian constitution to save her political power. It led to untold miseries, torture and sadness to millions of ordinary Indians. It all happened in the mid 1970s, and people suffered a lot by the politicians. It also shows the cruel hands of untouchability and casteism which suppressed the certain sects of people.

The novel *A Fine Balance* is remarkable for its sustained readability and clarity. The design of the story is quite simple. With an unnamed city (Bombay) at the centre, Mistry weaves together a subtle and compelling narrative about four unlikely characters Dina, Ishvar, Om and Maneck, who came together

soon after the government declares a 'State of Internal Emergency'. In the tiny flat of Dina Dalal, Ishvar, Om and Maneck were painfully constructing new lives which became entwined in circumstances no one could imagine.

The first was the middle class, urban world of Dina Dalal, a pretty widow in her forties, who maintained her fragile independent life with the two hired tailors and an accommodated paying guest. Then, there was a glimpse into rural India provided by Dina's tailors Ishvar Darji and Omprakash Darji, the rural untouchables from the family of tanners (*Chamaars*) who struggled to rise above their designated caste roles and better themselves by becoming tailors. They had to endure the cruelties of the so called high class people and their future was dark and hopeless. There was another world symbolized by Maneck Kohlah, a sensitive Parsi boy, who hated the city life and was eager to return home, in the north, after finishing his studies.

All these four characters faced lots of struggles. They were displaced, lonely and struggled for their identity and survival in a cruel world. Social circumstances, sense of isolation and rootlessness brought them together and made them create a bond of understanding. Their miseries, their joys, their sharing of the same food, sense of adventure, experiences of Migrancy and the time they spent together made them aware that life was often 'a fine balance' between hope and despair. Day by day, those four people learnt to live from their experiences as the immigrants.

But at the end, these four people's destiny fell into the hands of cruelty and the drastic, poor and miserable state. The political turmoil turned their lives upside down. Dina lost her independent life and depended on the charity of her brother; those tailors Ishvar and Om were turned to be the beggars because of the sterilization and the castration done to them. Maneck, who was very much disappointed in his life, committed suicide. As a result of their migration, these four migrants suffered a lot, faced lots of problems and eventually they lost their precious resources in their life. When the concept of the Migrancy experience is taken, the issues concerning the Diasporas would include not only the question of identity, but also the question of culture, power, the impact of geophysical conditions, the pattern of isolation, fear of survival and living in between. The novel *A Fine Balance* also explores such human predicaments with specific attention of the following themes: (i) the impact of geophysical condition on human behavior, (ii) living in -between (from roots to routes), and (iii) the pattern of isolation and fear of survival.

Whenever a person migrates to another country or place, first thing he/she faces that is geographical conditions which are generally different from his own country or native place. Then the problems of language, culture, traditions, living style and sensibility which differ from his society arise. In addition to it, the feeling of nostalgia also haunts the mind of an exiled person. Whether people are forced to be exiled or they choose to be in exile, in both conditions, it is not their own wish, but it is their circumstances which lead them to be in exile. Generally, when people think about exile, the number of negative aspects such as, being away from home and anxiety to adapt themselves with the another land, place or situation occur in their minds. So, through these concepts of migration, exile, nostalgia and home, Mistry makes his novel *A Fine Balance* as an interesting as well as a tragic one. He also shows his profound attachment towards tragic elements. While the characters Dina, Ishvar and Om chose to be in exile, the character Maneck was forcefully thrown to be in exile or pushed into it by the circumstances. Whether those characters chose on their own or pushed into it, all those characters tend to remain in exile, hoping a better and bright future. The novel first starts with the life of Dina. After losing her father at her age of twelve, her elder brother Nusswan took charge of their house. Nusswan earned his own living as a business man. He assumed himself as the head of the family and legal guardian to Dina. Being bullying, dominant and autocratic, he subjugated Dina more by ill treating her, making her do all household works. After Nusswan's marriage with Ruby, Ruby too joined Nusswan in subjugating her. So she soon found her a suitable husband, married him and started a life in her husband's rented house.

Unfortunately, she lost her husband very soon, and came back to her brother once again. She was continuously compelled by her brother to get remarried, but she rejected and her rejection made Nusswan to taunt her, saying: "...get married again, have children. Or do you prefer to live forever on my charity?" (*A Fine Balance*, 52) Because of such statements from her brother, she decided to go back to her husband's flat and live independently. Thus she chose the exile willingly (being away from her parental house in the same city Bombay). Through her exile, she sought to have bright possibilities along with the sense of individuality and freedom from her autocratic brother.

After her settlement in a city, she decided to rebuild her life without depending on others. She emerged as a strong, progressive and an independent woman. Though the rented house was shabby, had many mending works to be done and it remained as a little unfit for living, she managed to live in that flat and she made her earning by employing the two young men for tailoring. She accommodated Maneck as her paying guest against the strong oppositions from the landlord through the rent - collector. The landlord, who harassed Dina Dalal, never appeared in person and his power was embodied in the rent - collector who terrorized the tenants. As a migrant, she thus faced a lot and she was forced to manage their menace by posing Ishvar as her husband and Om and Maneck as their two sons:

"...he is my husband. The two boys are our sons. And the dresses are all mine...Go, tell your landlord he has no case." (*A Fine Balance*, 414)

But her protest did not last long for, after finding the truth about those people, the landlord exhibited his power through the rent collector and the two goondas, they beat up Ishvar, Om, Maneck and vandalized Dina's flat through two goondas:

Fluff from the shredded cushions floated around, settling slowly to the floor. Dina picked up the slashed casings; she felt dirty, as though the goondas' hands had molested her own being. The ripped dresses and soiled bolts began bearing down heavily on her. How could she explain to Au Revoir? What could she possibly tell Mrs. Gupta? (*A Fine Balance*, 431-432)

Mistry is more concerned with the untouchables, whose voices are suppressed by the upper caste and the politicians. In *A Fine Balance*, he portrays the cruelties committed on two untouchables from the village. The crisis in the Indian community which has its religious sanction is caused by untouchability. After independence, the Constitution of India included several laws to abolish untouchability by imposing severe punishments. But all these efforts still have not achieved any success as observed by Mistry in *his novel*. They are economically and sexually exploited; besides, they are deprived of education. They lose their identity as individuals and they simply become faceless. They do not live like other human beings but simply remain like animals. The lives of the tailors' fore-fathers reflect the cruelties of the caste system in rural India with unimaginable horrors are committed on the lower caste people. Even, Ishvar in his childhood too had seen, heard and faced such caste oppressions and violence. For example, Ishvar's father Dukhi was once rebellious against his landlord, he was beaten up and deprived of his wages; Ishvar and Narayan were punished rudely by the teacher for entering the school and touching the study equipments. So, ravaged Dukhi decided to abolish his villagers' caste rule, caste system by sending his two sons Ishvar and Narayan to the nearby town, to learn tailoring from his Muslim friend Ashraf.

Mistry is hence depicting courage and simplicity pitted against institutional might. An almost Kafkaesque struggle against the system and its reductive features exemplified in the mass family planning movement or the slum demolition occurs in *A Fine Balance*. And ultimately there is a failure. If the characters drive a fine balance between "hope and despair" -the terms are always mentioned together by Mistry, circumstances tilt in favour of despair alone. Thus Mistry's novels deal with an "essentially tragic case" of human predicament.

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