

TRACE OF DESTINY: LOOSING OF BALANCE IN *A FINE BALANCE*

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Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* set in Indira Gandhi's India and more especially during the time of emergency is a stark and moving portrait of life in India during this period. "It reflects the reality of India the predatory politics of corruption, tyranny, exploitation, violence and bloodshed. The novel also gives an insight into rural India focusing on injustice, the cruelty, and the horrors of deprivation and portrays the trauma of India along communal, religious and linguistic lines" (Dodiya 22).

Several reasons contributed to the Emergency in India and perhaps most important were a series of economic crises in the early 1970s. The rains failed, resulting in disaster for the harvest, and this was immediately followed by the OPEC oil crisis, which affected certain sections of the developed and developing nations. At about the same time there was the Naxalite peasant insurgency, which had begun in a small village in Bihar. Soon it spread to other parts of the country, attracted the youngsters in universities and colleges and large numbers of unemployed professional classes.

During Emergency, "the right to trial was effectively suspended; public meetings were banned; newspapers were subject to strict controls; and even the writings on freedom of Indira's father, Jawaharlal Nehru, and Mahatma Gandhi were censored"(Tariq Ali 185). However, perhaps the most sinister elements of the Emergency were initiated by Indira's son and heir apparent, Sanjay, who, despite having no electoral mandate, used his power base in Youth Congress to add some ideas to his own to his mother's 'Twenty Point Programme'.

Altogether it was a time of exploitations and violence, destruction and bloodshed when Indira as a Prime Minister became unpopular, moved away from the minds of millions of Indians. As Ibrahim reveals the people have nothing but sorrow when the world is controlled by wicked people: "these Emergency times are terrible, sister. Money can buy the necessary police order. Justice is sold to the highest bidder" (*A Fine Balance* 432).

Mistry feels that there is a fine balance to be preserved by nations and the Indian nation loses its fine balance during the Emergency. However Indian democracy compelled Mrs. Gandhi to call for fresh elections in which she and her party is thrown out of office and the balance was up held once again.

To the common man the Emergency is nothing but "one more Government tamasha...No consideration for people like us. Murder, suicide, naxalite- terrorist killing, police- custody death – everything ends up delaying trains" .Dina felt it as "games played by people in power"(6).

But to the upper class people like Mrs. Gupta and Nusswan it's a fascination , a magic wand capable of curing all diseases and decay. Nusswan reflects on the advantages of Emergency: with the coming of Emergency they have gathered power and are capable of freely expressing their opinion, punctuality has been resorted to the railway system, great improvement in industrial relation, could call police to handle union trouble makers, increased production due to strict labor, and above all could bribe police to achieve their needs (373).

Mrs. Gupta, the owner of Au Revoir Exports, approves of the outrages committed by political powers. “Never mind, said Mrs. Gupta. The Emergency is a good medicine for the nation. It will soon cure every one of their bad habits” (352). The student leaders like Avinash has a better perspective about the things which led to the Emergency. He instructs Maneck :

Three weeks ago the High Court found the Prime Minister guilty of cheating in the last elections. Which meant she had to step down? But she began stalling. So the opposite parties, student organizations, trade unions – they started mass demonstrations across the country .All calling for her resignation. Then, to hold on to power, she claimed that the country’s security was threatened by internal disturbances, and declared a State of Emergency (245).

Mistry does not show the political opposition with which the Emergency was met. Instead, he exposes the pomposity and absurdity of the governing regime in scenes of exuberant satire. The slum dwellers become easy targets for political parties seeking crowds to attend political rallies, using official authority. Sergeant Kesar announces: “ Attention, attention! Two people from each jhopdi must get on the bus! In five minutes – no delay. Otherwise, you will be arrested for trespassing on municipal property!” (261).

The irony is highlighted when they allow the rag picker to attend the rally along with his wife and six children as it was numbers that mattered and not listeners who would criticize the talk. The absolute alienation of the forced audience is made clear even before the rally by the deliberately ironic comments of the slum dwellers. The descriptions of the audience and their activities during the political speeches show their lack of concern and significance to the slum dwellers. Dwarfed by this paraphernalia, Indira herself, and her speech are rather less impressive, the crowd was least bothered as they knew well all these promises of shelter, food and clothing at controlled prices were dreams which could never be attained. Rajaram took out a coin and began playing Heads or Tails with Om. Others were busy making new friends, chatting, discussing the monsoon; children invented games and drew pictures in the dust restlessly waiting for the tea and money to be distributed. Watching the onstage buffoonery of garlanding and prostrating in front of the Prime Minister Rajaram remarks, “I told you it’s going to be a day at the circus – we have clowns, monkeys, acrobats, everything” (263).

But the rally takes on a farcical air and the parody is cranked up further when a helicopter takes to the sky scattering packets of rose petals, and later Sanjay Gandhi, hovering above the field in a hot-air balloon and strewing the fidgety audience with leaflets outlining the “Twenty-Point Programme”. The master of ceremonies surpasses himself in sycophancy: “Behold! Yonder in the clouds! Oh, we are truly blessed! ... Mother India sits onstage with us, and the Son of India shines from the sky upon us! What a blessed nation we are” (266).

The farce reaches a peak when the giant cutout, disturbed by the wind whipped up by the helicopter’s blades, topples onto the crowd below, the most evocative grotesque image of Indira Gandhi as a monstrous mother who crushes her children in her embrace. The rally disintegrates as ambulances arrive ‘to collect the casualties of the eighty-foot Prime Minister’s collapse.

The implementation of the programme is almost immediate. A few days after the rally, Om and Ishvar return home to find their jhopadpatty bulldozed to the ground according to city beautification plans. The final scathing indictment of the ruthless annihilating nation that devises measures to literally render its citizens impotent and crippled occurs in the episode of the grotesque carnival of the Nussbandhi Mela set up by the Family Planning Centre to promote its

sterilization camp. The officials attempt to give it the look of a popular village fair with its paraphernalia of "balloons, flowers, soap bubbles, coloured lights, snacks" while loudspeakers blared attractive bonuses for those willing to get themselves sterilized.

While Ashraf Chacha, Ishvar, and Om are in the village, they run into herders from the Family Planning Centre. As the Centre in this city did not fill its quota, they took random people from the street and forced them into a truck that drove them to the Family Planning Centre. Though the perplexed and bewildered people shouted, "First tell us what we've done! How can you catch people just like that? We have a right to be here, it's a market day!" (530), the constables met resistance with swinging lathis. Panic filled the market place as people pushed, pleaded, struggled with police and also tried to break through the cordon. But the police was snatching people at random. "Old men, boys, housewives with children were being dragged into the trucks. A few managed to escape; most were trapped like chickens in a coop, unable to do anything except wait to be collected by the law enforcers." (530). The police grabbed and stuffed them in garbage trunks and dragged the screaming people to the nussbandi mela where they were frightened to silent submission.

The officials and the doctors were turning a blind eye to such issues as these never bothered them and the masses were hopeless and utterly powerless, "What to do, bhai, when educated people are behaving like savages. How do you talk to them? When the ones in power have lost their reason, there is no hope" (535). Bharucha opines that "Mistry's subalterns do not really speak but their silences are represented through the mediation of Mistry's narrative" (qtd in Nila Shah 88).

Ishvar and Omprakash implore to escape the forced sterilization, but the vasectomy takes place. The haphazard way of doing it mechanically without much commitment is observed by Ishvar, "Actually, we tailors take more pride in our work. We show more consideration for fabric than these monsters show for humans. It is our nation's shame" (524). Even while Omprakash is recovering from the operation, he is castrated by the orders of the Thakur Dharamsi, an old enemy from the village. Their lives are completely ruined and hopes smashed, become mindful that Om will no longer be a promising groom as they made an eunuch out of him and no family would accept him for their daughters. Their wailings fell on deaf ears and no one came to their rescue as they were thought to be less than animals. To enhance their woes the partially sterilized instruments used for the operation cause an infection that makes Isvar's legs swell and blacken from groin downwards till they have to be amputated.

Mistry showcases the irony of development and beautification by exploring how such processes institutionalize cruelty and exploitation. Nandini Bhautoo opines, "He underscores the fact that any urban development and government measure works in conjunction with the so called law to exploit the poor. The politics of development is invariably, Mistry suggests, at the cost of humanity (Rohinton Mistry: An Introduction 78).

In *A Fine Balance*, the four major characters Dina Dalal, Omprakash, Ishvar and Maneck are evidences of what happens to the middle class people during the emergency. Om, Ishvar and Dina have to earn their livelihood within the very structures of social oppression they had set out to challenge. "Disappointment, betrayal, joy, heartache, hope – they all entered her life through the same door, she thought" (554). Though they struggle to achieve it with full earnestness their lives are completely ruined. The two tailors, who represent the common humanity, are somehow destined to undergo the consequences of all political measures implemented with the aid of power. Nothing has improved their state of affairs and they are thrown further from bad to Worse, yet they keep their spirits and hopes high, resisting with great effort to maintain a

balance, expressing immense stoicism as they can only be “destroyed but not defeated” as Hemingway’s old man, Santiago. As Valmik suggests, “There is always hope - hope enough to balance our despair. Or we would be lost.”(563). Mistry’s greatest achievement is that he took special care to depict the sensitive, sympathetic description of the inner life of the poor tailors, rendering them as genuine and lovable, with whom the reader identifies. “This is poverty with a human face” (Nandini 34).

The precariousness of their social position, indeed of their entire existence, is related to the eponymous theme of balance. The lawyer who was once the proof reader elaborates on the necessity of clinching to change:

‘What can anyone do in such circumstances? Accept it, and go on. Please always remember, the secret of survival is to embrace change, and to adapt. To quote “All things fall and are built again, and those that build them are gay.”... ‘You see, you cannot draw lines and compartments, and refuse to budge beyond them. Sometimes you have to use your failures as stepping stones to success. You have to maintain a fine balance between hope and despair.’ He paused, considering what he has just said. ‘Yes’, he repeated. ‘In the end, it’s all a question of balance’ (231).

So even when balances are lost, they get used to things, that they achieve a kind of boldness to accept life as it comes, dreams and hopes may not matter, they may survive as the majority of characters depicted in the novel, but fail to have a sustainable development which is highly essential for the productive and economic growth of an individual, society and the nation at large.

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