

HUMANISING THE INHUMAN THROUGH ROHINTON MISTRY'S 'A FINE BALANCE'

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'*A Fine Balance*' is a sweeping and powerful novel that has been compared to the works of Tolstoy and Dickens. It is a rich study of a difficult time in India's history, featuring complex and flawed characters. '*A Fine Balance*' is about man's inhumanity to man and the indomitableness of the human spirit. Indeed, "*Mistry's celebration of courage, generosity, self-sacrifice and hope in the face of pervasive misery creates a moving testament (Washington Post)*". Set against a thoroughly Indian background, it combines Dickens's vivid sympathy for the poor with Solzhenitsyn's controlled outrage, celebrating both the resilience of the human spirit and the searing heartbreak of failed dreams.

Literature is a creative and humanising force in life. We read to find out who we are and to enrich our lives. It allows us to get in touch with our senses, feelings and emotions. Through reading we extend our background and are enabled to vicariously experience, feel and recognize the thoughts and emotions of others. Thus, we gradually learn to understand feelings of love, joy, dislike or distrust. There is a tremendous sense of joy when reading a book we tend to discover, "I am not the only one". The characters become alive as we read and share their problems, dilemmas and emotional conflicts. Literature can humanise even the inhuman. It can convey nuances and can uncover overlooked specificities.

Mistry's second novel, *A Fine Balance* exposes the abuses of political power that threaten to destroy the dignity of the individual. Set against the 'Emergency Measures' imposed by Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in the mid-1970s, the novel is a powerful and painful examination of a humanity beset by social and political repression. *A Fine Balance* met with high critical acclaim and won many international honours. In 1996, it won the Los Angeles Times Book Prize for Fiction. It also bagged the 1996 Commonwealth Writers Prize, the Royal Society of Literature's Winifred Holtby Award, and Denmark's ALOA Prize, and was also shortlisted for the 1996 Booker prize. In 2001 *A Fine Balance* became the first Canadian novel to be promoted through Oprah Winfrey's Book Club.

Though it takes place in a time of political upheaval and chaos, *A Fine Balance* is not a political diatribe. Instead, it is a beautiful and compassionate portrait of the resilience of the human spirit when faced with death, despair, and unconscionable suffering. Set in an unnamed city by the sea, it is the story of four disenfranchised strangers—a widow, a young student, and two tailors—who are forced by their impoverished circumstances to share a cramped apartment. The editors of *A Fine Balance* Barnes and Nobel maintain that initially distrustful of one another,

Dina, Maneck, Ishvar, and Om gradually build loving, familial bonds and learn together "to maintain a fine balance between hope and despair" in a society suddenly turned inhumanly cruel and corrupt. The backstories of these characters create a depth of understanding in the reader and as their story unfolds, we feel emotionally invested in their future.

Rohinton Mistry reveals the **social problems** as a social novelist and becomes a part of the pantheon of writers such as Mulkraj Anand, Charles Dickens, Salman Rushdie and Thomas Hardy. As a social humanist, he strives hard to reform the society by exposing the various problems of society. Socialism and humanism co-mingle to form a manifesto for the welfare of the Indian masses through his novels. His humanistic convictions and revolutionary thoughts unleash a war against all forms of feudal exploitation, oppression, especially evil social practices of casteism and untouchability. In short, Mistry desires peace to prevail in the society by understanding the various problems of individuals. An unchallengeable feature of Mistry's humanism in *A Fine Balance* is the theme of condemnation of struggle for peace. Ambition and dreams of his protagonists are tied with hope and despair about the life of the modern world. Mistry shows the basic ambivalence of common men, as a realist and humanist through his works:

“You cannot draw lines and compartments, and refuse to budge beyond them ... You have to maintain a fine balance between hope and despair ... In the end, it's all a question of balance. (p. 231)”

It might be said that humanism is a philosophy in which the **central concern is always the man and his happiness**. It underlines the value and dignity of man and takes him as the measure of allthings. With the passage of time, several types of humanism were evolved – Naturalistic, Scientific, Religious, Marxist, Pragmatist, Realistic, Radical, Evolutionary etc. Still what remains common to all of these is the faith in the potentialities latent in man for his own good as well as the good of the entire mankind. All knowledge and human institutions are deemed useful only when they help man realize his potentialities. Most of the humanists of the West and some of the East hold that what matters to man really is this earthly existence and not the unseen other world, so that man's attention ought to be centred on what is obtained here and now.

A **humanistic approach** is a non- technical approach. It is holistic in nature. It considers the need for self-reflectiveness and self-actualization. It is a concern to growth. The humanistic approach paves the way for people to step into their own potential, through active engagement with their own journey of growth. It recognizes the spiritual nature of human beings and works to help people integrate all levels of their experience: body, thoughts feelings, spirit, and soul.

Different thinkers have viewed humanism differently. So far as Mistry's humanism is concerned; “he's a writer who's interested in telling stories . . . stories about the human heart and the human mind and of how we all struggle in this world, whether we are migrants or bank workers, beggars or college students, tailors or pavement artists”(Samrat) . He seems to believe in the essential goodness of man. An old-fashioned storyteller, Mistry is adept at revealing not only our flaws but also our virtues, our ability for human connection and kindness.

There is a wide cross-section of society portrayed in Mistry's novels. Like a true humanist, Mistry focuses his gaze on the **scum of the earth** and upholds their human rights. His humanism is amply reflected in the treatment of characters occupying lower stations in life. Who can forget, for example, the bond that Gustad Noble and Tehmul-lungra form in *Such a Long Journey*? And what about the troubled yet moving relationship that forms among the four main characters in *A Fine Balance*: Dina, the hounded tailors Isvar and Omprakash, and the

endearing Maneck? Disparate backgrounds notwithstanding, the four cement a bond. Driven by circumstances, they even share a common roof, connect with each other by kindness and love – that which make us human. He not only portrays the hapless lives of Om and Ishvar but also of their kith and kin, back in the interior rural region of north India. The reader is flabbergasted when he comes to know of the inhuman treatment of the so-called low-caste people by the upper caste people in the countryside. How they are exploited economically, sexually, socially and politically is portrayed graphically and at great length in this novel. One is amazed at the research done by the author. What he has shown is something which any knowledgeable Indian would corroborate. His sensitivity is reflected in the character of Maneck Kohlah. Disillusioned by the fate that overtook his erstwhile friends Om, Ishvar and Dina, Maneck commits suicide. Maneck's loss is a loss for the Indian middle class, whose morality, hopes and desires, he embodies. His death at the end of the novel is shocking but insightful of the losses that the Indian middle class has borne and still continues to suffer. It makes one wonder if Maneck was right and everything did end badly:

“If there was a large enough refrigerator, he would be able to preserve the happy times..., keep them from ever spoiling...but it was an unrefrigerated world. And everything ended badly (p. 226).

This episode shows the writer's frustration over the inhuman treatment of poor people. Indeed, humanitarianism is an essential feature of humanism of all denominations. It is quite clear that humanism has its biggest enemy in the *politician* who uses the label of humanist for himself but actually uses it as a ploy to serve his selfish ends. Nandini Bhautto rightly notes, “A Fine Balance can be read as an expression of the predicament of the self in the Indian urban/rural context. In spite of its stark realism, the novel reveals an underlying moral purpose and a positive commitment to justice and humanitarian concerns.”(p.112)

There is no doubt that in the name of humanism, politicians have committed many *anti-human activities*, as Edward Said notes, “...it has been the abuse of humanism that discredits some of humanism's practitioners without discrediting humanism itself.”(p.168) Mistry leaves no stone unturned to expose the Machiavellian politicians. In *A Fine Balance*, we find the Emergency era of Mrs Gandhi under scanner. Such is the lawlessness during the Emergency that Sergeant Kesar, tells Dina Dalal “Lots of people have disappeared in the Emergency” (p.113).

How the politicians make use of the poor to further their personal agendas is effectively portrayed by Mistry. They are promised food and money and thus lured to attend election rallies. The Prime Minister likes to maintain an army of sycophants. While she cares a jot about the court judgement setting aside her election on account of malpractices, she sermonizes to the countrymen to be disciplined! In the name of removing poverty, she gets the poor removed to forced labour camps.

The most horrifying acts of the Emergency and its repercussions are felt by the main protagonists Ishvar and Omprakash, the two characters from the lowest strata of the Indian caste system who have tried hard to move up the social ladder to that of a tailor. But their life is fraught with peril. Their families are burnt alive and they have to leave the village in search of a better life, first to the town and then to the metropolis. In the big city, Ishvar and Om have to live under ghastly conditions. They are rounded up and taken away from their slum dwelling in the city to a labour camp by the City Embellishment program. The scene reminds one of the way ‘**ranchers round-up cattle**’. This is not where their misfortune and torture ends. After being rescued from the camp by BeggarMaster, the leader of a band of beggars, Ishvar and Om are forcibly picked up from the town square (where they had gone to find Om a bride) to fulfil the

daily quota of sterilizations. The operations are done in less than sanitary conditions and Ishvar's legs then become affected with gangrene and both his limbs have to be amputated. The description is particularly grotesque as the author mentions, "From the groin to the knee the flesh had become black" (p.293). The political clout of the village Zamindar, Thakur Dharamsi is quite evident here when he directs the doctor to operate upon Om too, who is a mere youth, waiting to get married. There is no escape from this vicious forced sterilization scheme, the pet project of Indira's beloved son, Sanjay Gandhi. Ashraf Chacha, a grand old man, also goes through a vasectomy and loses his life after the operation.

The nadir of the politicians' lowliness comes in the form of a local politico Dharamsi getting Om castrated to settle personal score with him. Om's father and grandfather as also their wives had been butchered by the same politicians back in the village at the time of elections. By giving these details, Mistry highlights the violation of human rights of the poor people. That he gives such a large canvas to the scum of the earth speaks volumes about his humanist credentials. This shows the callous way in which politics works in India.

If, on the one hand, Mistry sets up parallels between the oppressive policies of the Emergency and those of the caste system, on the other hand, he demonstrates the *similitude between its draconian measures and those of the fascist state*. The slum dwellers, whose homes are razed to the ground by the Beautification brigade, are corralled into trucks, which deliver them to construction sites as free labour. Mistry invokes here **shades of slavery as well as of the Jewish holocaust**. The parallel with slavery is reinforced when Ishvar and Omprakash, who had been forcibly transported from their hutments despite being employed, have to buy their freedom by indenturing themselves to the city's Beggarmaster. But their transportation to the construction site, which functions as a concentration camp, alludes to the more covert wish to eliminate the people whose unaccommodated presence mars the city's beauty. Nusswan, Dina Dalal's wealthy but obtuse brother, gives voice to the idea of a final solution. He suggests that the two hundred million who are "*surplus to requirements*" may be eliminated through "*a free meal containing arsenic or cyanide, whichever is cost-effective*" (458). In the end, the project for genocide occurs through more subtle methods when Ishvar and Omprakash are forced to undergo botched vasectomies that leave one crippled and the other castrated. The holocaust of the Untouchables is managed under masquerades that disguise its deadly intent.

Religious humanism is what suffuses Rohinton Mistry's work. Religious humanists make sure that religion is never allowed to subvert the higher purpose of meeting human needs in the here and now. Indeed, like a true religious humanist, Gustad seems to believe that "it is immoral to wait for God to act for us". Thus, in his scheme of things, it is one human being coming to the rescue of the other. Dina Dalal continues to welcome Om and Ishvar, now turned handicapped beggars, to her brother's home, much against the wishes of her big brother.

A true humanist that Mistry is, he believes in reason and not superstition. Scepticism of the secular humanists has, for a while, caught hold of Gustad as it does in case of Ibrahim, a minor character in *A Fine Balance*, who ponders, "Did the Master of the Universe take no interest in levelling the scales – was there no such thing as a fair measure?" (P.87) In '*A Fine Balance*' the writer bares the *nefarious activities of the priestly class*. The priests, whether Hindus or Parsis, pose as the representatives of God on earth. In their zeal to be called god men, they bid goodbye to all humanist principles. To them, man is created to serve the design of God and has no innate value himself. The culture and tradition are interpreted in such a way that the human angle is made subservient to the divine plan.

Mistry does not present the *priestly class in favourable light*. Most of the Parsi dustors are presented in different novels as *lechers*. So is the Hindu Pandit Laluram in *A Fine Balance*. As with the Hindu Pandit, so with the Parsi dustors, Mistry looks upon this clan as chips of the same block. In *A Fine Balance*, we have some pen-pictures of such Parsi priests. When Dina was a young girl, she visited the fire temple in the company of her mother. This was a monthly routine in memory of her late father. Before commencing the ceremony, Dustor Framji unctuously shook Mrs Shrof's hand and gave Dina prolonged hug of the sort he reserved for girls and young women. His reputation for squeezing and fondling had earned him the tile of 'Dustor Dab-Chab', along with the hostility of his colleagues, who resented not so much his actions but his lack of subtlety, his refusal to disguise his embraces with fatherly or spiritual concern. They feared that one day he would go too far, drool over his victim or something, and disgrace the fire-temple:

"Dina squirmed in his grasp as he patted her head, rubbed her neck, stroked her back and pressed himself against her. He had a very short beard, stubble that resembled flakes of grated coconut, and it scraped her cheeks and forehead. He released her just when she had summoned enough courage to tear her trapped body from his arms."(Pp.19-20)

Feminism, after all, another face of humanism. In the novel *A Fine Balance*, we have a strong character in Dina Dalal, whose delineation would warm the cockles of any feminist. Dina is driven against the wall due to the dominating attitude of her elder brother who would not brook her attempt to be self-reliant. But she has it in her, so she struggles hard to be on her own and thus to prove herself. When she is not able to carry on the sewing work due to her failing eyesight, she hires two tailors Om and Ishvar. She treats them humanely and stands by them when they need shelter in the overcrowded space-starved city of Bombay. She is threatened by the landlord and is indeed thrown out finally but she fights till the end.

It is remarkable that Mistry *locates human feelings even in apparently evil characters*; there is a method in this though. This discovery does not hold well in case of rich people or politicians. He finds essential goodness in characters occupying lower stations in life. They may appear to be evil but at the back exists a history of circumstances which is responsible for making a mess of their lives. Still, deep within their hearts, they retain the milk of human kindness. The character of Ibrahim belongs to this category. He is the rent-collector for the society apartment block in which Dina Dalal lives. He is described as an elderly man who looked older than his age. He goes about collecting rent from various tenants on behalf of the landlord who is not a kind man. He also looks after court cases involving tenancy His landlord has issued a letter to Dina Dalal objecting to the tailoring work in her apartment. Ibrahim warned her that she would receive a legal notice if she continued with work. After some days he came again with a final notice. Another visit followed from Ibrahim during which he demanded of her to vacate the premises within forty- eight hours. This was no serving of legal notice. Instead, there were two goondas with him for "faster results", who started destroying clothes and sewing machines. When Maneck resisted, one ruffian took out his flick-knife. Ibrahim was aghast because he had not thought that things would go that far:

"Stop it! I was present when you got your orders! There was nothing aboutbeatings and knives!" said Ibrahim. (p.430)

The goondas departed after smashing glass panes of windows. When Dina and Ishvar castigated Ibrahim for doing this at his age he felt repentant and feelings now surge within him. Ibrahim could control himself no longer. Putting his hand over his face, he made a peculiar

sound. It was not apparent immediately that he was trying to cry noiselessly: ‘It’s no use,’ his voice broke. ‘I cannot do this job, I hate it! Oh, what has my life become!’ He felt under the sherwani and pulled out his kerchief to blow his nose: ‘Forgive me, sister,’ he sobbed:

“I did not know when I brought them, that they would do such damage. For years I have followed the landlord’s orders. Like a helpless child. He tells me to threaten somebody, I threaten. He tells me to plead, I plead. If he raves that a tenant must be evicted, I have to repeat the raving at the tenant’s door I am his creature. Everybody thinks I am an evil person, but I am not, I want to see justice done, for myself, for yourself, for everyone. But the world is controlled by wicked people, we have no chance, we have nothing but trouble and sorrow...” (432).

Thus, Rohinton Mistry strongly states that human side is not totally eclipsed in the people at the lower rung of the society.

Humanism stands for *human values*. The milk of human compassion flows unchecked in the fiction of Rohinton Mistry. This compassion is for the ‘other’ – the downtrodden, the destitute and the detested in society. In this, there is no consideration of caste, creed, colour, sex or status. Mistry is out and out a humanist who believes in humanitarian values. His kind of humanism is for the cardinal principle of freedom, fraternity and equality of all human beings.

Like a true humanist he places the interest of human being ahead of anything or any concept. In ‘*Family Matters*’ there is a tall wall around the ‘Khodadad Building’. It was erected to give a sense of privacy to the Parsi residents of the building. But as is a common sight in India, the passers-by would urinate against the wall, which caused a nauseating stench all the time. The Parsi residents were quite perturbed. Gustad happened to see one day a painter who was displaying his art in public at the Flora Fountain, for a little money. An idea came to his head that feels that the boundary wall could be painted with the images of different gods and then nobody would urinate there. He brought the painter round. First of all, the whole wall was washed. The artist was talented and qualified. He made paintings of gods, saints and prophets of different religions. The artist first painted a portrait of ‘Trimurti’, the Hindu Gods of creation, preservation and destruction. After that he drew the Crucifixion of Jesus, Jumma Masjid, Ganpati Bapa and others. Thus, he filed the wall with images of gods, prophets and saints. The wall looked very clean and decorated. The atmosphere was full of the scent of agarbattis which were lighted by the people before the images of gods and goddesses. Through this strategy, Gustad tries to give the humanistic message of peace and tolerance to society, as it really is a great need of today. But more than that, he seems to say that one should not mind using the divine motif for the sake of a clean environment for man. Thus, gods and goddesses of all religions are put at the service of human being. “What better place than this sacred wall of miracles to pause and meditate upon our purpose? The wall of gods and goddesses. The wall of Hindu and Muslim, Sikh and Christian, Parsis and Buddhist! A holy wall, a wall suitable for worship and devotion, whatever your faith!”

A Fine Balance is a *realistic novel* and the horrors of life of poor people have been very sympathetically and very humanely portrayed. There is no scope for *poetic justice* in Mistry’s novels. *A Fine Balance* is also a text in which Mistry has made a conscious effort to embrace more of the social reality of India, so although the novel opens with a Parsi woman Dina Dalal’s story in Bombay, it soon enlarges its scope to include her lodger Maneck Kohlah from a hill station in North India and tailors, Ishvar and Omprakash, who come to her from a village.

The narrative also encompasses what Walter Benjamin has called the city poet's special concern with rag pickers, beggars and suicide victims/heroes. As their tragic tales unfold, one gets the impression that Mistry's texts attempting to articulate the silences of centuries of exploitation, domination and oppression of the poorest of the poor of India.

Apart from materialistic attitude of contemporary society, Mistry, in a true humanist vein, focuses on the emotional life of the man. Eminent critic Nilufer Bharucha avers,

“Sympathy, compassion and humanity are in fact the keywords to the comprehension of this book. The compassion for the dalits and the other unfortunates finds centre-stage in *A Fine Balance* making it Mistry's finest novel till date (p.143)”

A true humanist that Mistry is, he opposes exploitation of all types. Apart from materialistic attitude of contemporary society, Mistry, in a true humanistic vein, focuses on the emotional life of the man. In this novel, the human touch redeems the shortcomings of the man and makes it a vehicle to transcend both the self and the other.

Mistry's novels are a marvellous *showcase of relationships*, and this can be observed under the theme of human-relationship. ‘San Francisco Chronicle’ is all praise for the portrayal of human relationship in *A Fine Balance*:

“Mistry's greatest strength lies in depicting the human heart, in all its longing and imperfection with unsentimental tenderness”.

In *A Fine Balance* we can see the middle class and the anonymous, faceless working class meet and sympathize with each other, learn to overcome their prejudices to forge bonds of friendship, affection and humanity. In an interview, Mistry stated that this novel started with an image – a woman at a sewing machine- and was later expanded to include the tailors, to bring in the horror of caste exploitation and violence of rural India, and the figure of Maneck Kohlah from Kashmir. All of these characters, together with Dina Dalal- the fiery-tempered, intelligent, fiercely independent and prematurely aged young woman- constitute a small world of recreated family of the novel. ‘**Observer**’ found the novel enthralling and rightly remarked:

‘Mistry is a master blender of the picaresque and the tragic . . . To say that he captures the textures of India well and creates larger-than-life characters is to note the least of his achievements. If anything, his success is to make life seem so much larger than the characters – a far tougher task for the novelist.’

It must also be admitted that humanism is a *philosophy of optimism*. Since it gives centrality to man, it is but natural that it appeals to us a lot. In *A Fine Balance*, the overriding despair in the story is balanced by the subdued *but hopeful ending*. Mistry, uses the hopeful ending to offset the overall dismal tone. The balancing of the ending reflects humanity's basic need for hope to counter the frustrating reality of lost dreams. Otherwise, the characters within the story and the readers as well would lose hope, which would then result in despair. The moments of joy are simple and fleeting in the narrative, but when we come across them, we learn to savour and enjoy them that much more, just like some of the disenfranchised characters in this book. The horrific things we read about are never easily forgotten, yet the optimistic scenes are a well-earned reward that the reader receives after passing through the terrors that riddle the story. Though it might sound like a cliché, but Mistry truly teaches us to find ‘beauty in everything’, which makes those 700 pages well worth the read.

The themes explored in *A Fine Balance* are *globally relevant*. These include the strength of the human spirit, hope for a better future and the common need for community and belongingness. Globalization creates the hope for a better future which makes individuals to take

the leap of faith. Mistry's *A Fine Balance* is taken to show the balance between globalization and community. Mistry's characters cling on to the thin ray of light projected by globalization, their quest for survival and freedom comes at a cost. Trying to free themselves from the bondage of casteism Ishvar and Om takes this leap to the city by the sea (i.e. Mumbai) with the hope of a brighter future. Disgusted by the treatment of his sons by members of the more privileged caste, Dukhi sends his sons Ishvar and Narayan to be apprenticed as tailors in a nearby town. They are placed under the loving care of Ashraf, a Muslim who is Dukhi's friend. In the village they were treated as untouchables by their own religious group. Here in the town Ashraf takes them under his wing without showing any religious disparities. Human bonding of friendship plays a vital role than the religious dictates of caste and creed. Pillai Roy observes that "In stressing the importance of brain over brawn, globalization has given rise to an entire jargon: lifelong learning, knowledge society, and human and social capital (p.194)". In this novel Mistry's focus is not education, he seems to acknowledge the value of life-long learning by centring some pivotal events on the human impulse and ability to learn. As the characters move from distrust to friendship and friendship to love, *A Fine Balance* creates an enduring panorama of human spirits, full of courage, sacrifice, and generosity, in the face of pervasive misery:

"Did life treat everyone so wantonly, ripping the good things to pieces while letting bad things fester and grow like fungus on unrefrigerated food? . . . it was all part of living, that the secret of survival was to balance hope and despair, to embrace change (p.432).

Thus, on the basis of thorough examination of Mistry's *A Fine Balance* we may deduce that Mistry's humanism stands for essential human goodness despite individual differences, equal human rights, functionality of religion and end to socio-political exploitation of vulnerable sections of society. While the story is uniquely Indian, it is also universally human. The genius of Mistry lies in depicting characters that have lived lives of nothing but struggle and destitution in a humanizing, and compassionate, yet realistic way. There's plenty of heartache in the novel. The tragedy, sorrow, and loss could overwhelm some readers. However, when sadness touches those that don't struggle to the same extent, they react differently.

"Full of wonderful moments of pathos and humanity [Mistry] has an eye for the lovely detail, the undercurrent of friendships, the tugs in parent-child relationships... It is in Mistry's descriptions of subtle relationships that we forget we are reading [a book] and are transported into another reality" (Philadelphia Inquirer).

Other than deep distrust of the government and politicians, very few emotions are black and white in this novel. In short, *A Fine Balance* offers perspectives and images that can counter the familiar and harmful stereotypes. It stimulates our aesthetic awareness very strongly and results in humanising us. It is really "a masterpiece of illumination and grace. Like all great fiction, *it transforms our understanding of life.*" (Kapadia, p.195)

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