

ROHINTON MISTRY'S *A FINE BALANCE*: PRIVILEGING THE MARGINALISED VOICE

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Abstract

Rohinton Mistry being an eminent novelist from the group of second generation postcolonial diasporic writers, writes about India with profuse vigour and dynamism. Bombay has become a perennial source of inspiration in his writings. His second novel *A Fine Balance* (1995) gives hideous details of the immoral and unlawful Emergency imposed by the Prime Minister Mrs. Gandhi in 1975 and especially it projects the lives of the four unfortunate individuals namely Dina Dalal, Omprakash, Ishvar Darji and Maneck Kohlah allied by the same string of overpowering fate. In this novel he has deviated from the Parsi ethos that was displayed in his earlier writings. Here he encompasses different religions, castes and creeds to show the oppression and cruelty on them. His primary concern is to highlight the marginalised and unheard voice of the Parsi community and the atrocities they had to endure during Emergency. Mistry is really concerned about the slow but steady waning out of the Parsi community and his writings would preserve the distinct identity of the dwindling race. This paper seeks to present the diverse marginalised voices especially in *A Fine Balance* amid the historical context of Emergency.

Key Words: Postcolonial, Privilege, Emergency, Ethnic, Marginalised, Community, Oppression, Castes etc.

In the international literary scene, Indian English Fiction of the present time is seen to be dominated by the second generation of postcolonial writers who were born after decolonization. These writers are born in Indian soil and write in English with more distinctive voice, dynamism, vigour and a level of self-reliance than colonials. We can find many writers of Indian ‘diaspora’. Rohinton Mistry is one such eminent postcolonial diasporic writer like V. S. Naipaul, Salman Rushdie, Upamanyu Chatterjee, Vikram Seth and Amitav Ghosh who have liberated Indian English Literature from the colonial yoke.

Rohinton Mistry was born in India but immigrated to Canada in 1975. In that sense he is an immigrant writer writing for his birth place from abroad. Mistry is a prolific writer for whom India remains an important subject matter or rather specifically; Bombay (now Mumbai) is a perennial source of sustenance and inspiration that he draws from this locale for his fiction. In 1987 he first published *Tales From Firozsha Baag* which was a collection of eleven short stories. His second output *Such A Long Journey* (1991) was a novel and it won the Governor General’s Award, The Commonwealth Writers Prize for Best Book and the Canada First Novel Award. It was short listed for the Prestigious Booker Prize. It has been translated into several languages worldwide despite being a film adaptation in 1998. Rohinton Mistry’s *magnum opus* is his second novel *A Fine Balance* (1995). This narrative is embedded in the mid 1970s independent India and it spans over a period of ten years of emergent Indian democracy. This epic novel with its sixteen chapters covering from the opening one *Prologue 1975* to the concluding chapter, *Epilogue 1984*, reveals historical, geographical, religious, as well as economical aspects of the nation to form the realistic ambience of the novel. Extended over an anonymous coastal metropolis, a close by village and a small city in the Hills, *A Fine Balance* gives hideous particulars of the iniquitous Emergency imposed by the Prime Minister Mrs. Gandhi in 1975 and especially it projects the lives of the four unfortunate people namely Dina Dalal, Omprakash, Ishvar Darji and Maneck Kohlah connected by the same thread of overpowering fate. The lives of these characters from different social categories are ‘adversely affected by the political juggernaut of Emergency’ (Wadhawan 79). They come from different destinations to assemble in a modernizing post-independence Indian metro Bombay which according to Raymond Williams, a multiplicities magnet for people from all over the country, a future-oriented place increasingly ‘producing and reproducing . . . the social reality of the nation as a whole’ (Williams 148).

A Fine Balance is a stunning, splendidly textured and authoritative narrative of Rohinton Mistry and is written with empathy, satire, hilarity and insight. This narrative is typically different from Mistry’s earlier narrative *Such A Long Journey* in terms of its moving away from the ‘quintessential strong Parsi ethos’ (Wadhawan 77) and the description of the middle class Parsi domestic and social life. The characters in *Such A Long Journey* do not play an active and significant role in the plot but in *A Fine Balance* most of the diverse characters contribute significantly to the plot. ‘In this novel, Mistry shows the connection between the Parsi world and the larger tapestry of the nation’ (Bhautoo-Dewnarain 34).

The intention of the novelist was to make a conscious effort to depict the reality of the multi-ethnic groups in India’s social structure and moreover he wanted to tell the story through the eyes and the voices of the dispossessed, the ones at the very bottom. Mistry delineates the nation’s diversity by combining together a wide variety of people from different professions like tailors, businessmen, students, teachers, servants, lawyers, doctors, textile workers, a hair-collector, a beggar master, a monkey man, a chemist and people from different religions like Hindus, Muslims, Parsis and Sikhs and from different castes and creeds like Brahmins, Thakurs,

Pandits, Chamaars, Bhungis. Above all they are from different age groups and sexes. John Ball says: ‘in its careful exploration of diverse gender, class and religious subject positions, it is a much more inclusive work than its predecessor’ (83-84).

The political focal point of *A Fine Balance* is the Internal Emergency of 1975-77. ‘The Emergency renders life precarious for the poor, muffles opposition and leads to abuse of all types.’ (Bhautoo-Dewnarain 31) Mistry’s main aim is to project a multi-dimensional picture of the internal Emergency which suspended civil liberties. He does it through various techniques like the disparate views expressed by this heterogeneous crowd who become victims of this situation. The cataclysm of Partition aggravated the communal riots and Mistry develops his characters to frame their own strategies to deal with the frenzied situation. Dina Dalal, the main protagonist, describes the Emergency as ‘games played by people in power’ (*AFB* 75). She is fearful about the dreary economic state of affairs of the country in the Emergency period. According to Nusswan the country’s progress has so long been held back by hackneyed ideologies and a constructive change will be witnessed very soon. He thinks the Prime Minister as ‘a true spirit of renaissance’ (*AFB* 371). To him compulsory sterilization will solve the acute population problem of the nation and Government’s Beautification Programme will redecorate the washed out glory. But in reality the demolition of slums under the Beautification Programme renders thousands homeless and the heart wrenching tale of the sterilization camp adds to the terror by presenting the callous and merciless manner in which sterilization is forcibly performed on Ishwar and Omprakash. And Omprakash’s castration winds up all his marriage hopes in future and even fertilizer is granted to the farmers only after sterilization is done to them. The narrative also unearths a host of events that occur during this turbulent period in Indian history and the horrors allied to it. The narrative is replete with instances of vicious cruelty by the government and its agents. The novelist expresses his apprehension regarding India’s comprehensive identity which is under severe threat. Mistry does not refer directly to the Prime Minister in the narrative but gives her an opportunity to defend the Emergency through her political discourse:

‘There is nothing to worry about just because the Emergency is declared. It is a necessary measure to fight the forces of evil. It will make things better for ordinary people. Only the crooks, the smugglers, the black marketeers need to worry, for we will soon put them behind bars.’

Despite the Prime Minister’s oratorical eloquence of incorporating Twenty-Point Development Programme to provide food, clothing, shelter, to establish schools and hospitals, to eradicate poverty from the nation, it amuses her listeners as they have very little veneration to all these policies. Emergency is also presented through press and media reports about abuses perpetrated during this period, testimonies of torture, deaths in police custody and editorials challenging proper investigations and punishment for the guilty. Rightly does Wadhawan say ‘Mistry illustrates the farcical regime of Indira’s misgovernance’ (79).

Economically *A Fine Balance* abounds in projection of dearth and scarcity throughout the nation. Mistry portrays poverty with a human face. The city by the sea is filled with images of poverty and impoverishment and the protagonist Dina Dalal’s flat embodies this poverty ‘Everywhere there was evidence of her struggle to stay ahead of squalor, to mitigate with neatness and order the shabbiness of poverty’ (*AFB* 200). A discussion of the writer’s sympathy for the poor, the downtrodden, the ‘subalterns’ in the novel would be incomplete without considering the state of acute poverty especially of the lower class destitute and untouchables of the society. ‘The novel deals less with the struggle of the Zoroastrian minority and more with the dispossessed subaltern’

(Wadhawan 77) from Parsis to Muslims to Dalits in the crisis-ridden times of Emergency. ‘The fact remains that the Parsis are a marginalised lot as marginalised as the Dalits and the Muslims.’ (Wadhawan 78) Mistry tactfully introduces us to the caste oppression, superstition, gender inequalities, and untouchability prevalent in the countryside long after India’s prized independence. In *A Fine Balance* we witness the narrative of four middle class troubled Parsi characters intertwined with the chronology of the nation’s history.

The choice of occupation in the village is determined through heredity and caste line. Dukhi mochi (cobbler and leather-worker) is the representative of the Chammar caste. He is a burdened inheritor of the traditional caste system and refuses to be segregated by his lower strata. He strives to ease his pain and penury inflicted by the upper class on him so he defies the tradition by uttering: ‘I spit in their upper-caste faces. I don’t need their miserable jobs from now on’ (*AFB* 105). Dukhi ‘breaks off from the time honoured tradition of meek compliance to the caste system.’ (Wadhawan 80) He has become successful in realizing his ‘self’, and the quest for ‘self-realization’ is marked by the urge to be free. So to him ‘Freedom’ means ‘the individual coming to terms with his own past and with himself, accepting his limitations and going on from there, however terrified he may be’ (Harishankar 10). He sends his sons Narayan and Ishwar to be apprenticed as tailors in the city. Narayan marries Radha without any having any dowry and builds a dwelling by showing the skill of his tailoring expertise. Dwindling opportunities of work in the villages cause a mass exodus from the rural to the urban which is full of amenities and it becomes evident in the narrative of Mistry.

India’s desired independence ushered in an era of optimism and modernity which is not found as one of the villagers says it: ‘Government passes new laws, says no more untouchability, yet everything is same. The upper class bastards still treat as worse than animals.’ (*AFB* 142) Mistry projects the post-independent reality of villages with its Brahmins, thakurs, pundits and zamindars who wield power and prowess to thwart the democratic foundation of the nation. Thakur Dharamsi and his ruffians represent the corrupt section of the society. During the time of the assembly elections, when Narayan persists on casting his vote according to his will against the demand of the local leader, Thakur Dharamsi takes revenge of Narayan for his noncompliance and rebelliousness by brutally killing him and burning his entire family to death by setting fire in the house and everything became silent for a moment as the house is engulfed in the blaze. The whole village is traumatized by the excruciating screams but with utter helplessness and fear they can neither do anything effective nor raise their voices against this violent massacre. Mistry very dexterously exposes the amalgamation of a fiercely repressive condition, crushing poverty, and caste oppression and discrimination which overpower any such individual to act in rebellion. The stern actualities and sickening insinuations of anarchism and the exploitation that could go on in the name of rule and regulation, enhancement and development in a democratic country is vehemently criticised by Mistry.

Mistry ‘gives an insight into rural Indian Caste politics that survives the post-independence democracy’ (Wadhawan 80). He emphasizes the difficulty of fighting against this deep rooted narrow casteism in India which is negating to the prospect of modernity. *A Fine Balance* demonstrates and explores ‘the effects of untouchability on individuals with respect to caste’ and ‘the injustices of caste and probes the implications of defying it’ (Genestch 202). Again the villagers in contrast to the selfish city breeders epitomize communal harmony. The lower castes rather than the upper caste Hindus support the Muslims in the village during the Partition riots. The twisted legal ambience of the nation under severe oppression and violence at the time of internal Emergency is emphatically shown in the novel by depicting the accident of

Rustom and the culprit behind this killing is never arrested, misuses of the Rent Act by the landlord to cheat and make profit over his tenants, Narayan's unlawful killing by Thakur Dharamsi in the village, burning alive of Dukhi and his entire family and the farcical investigation conducted by the police in this matter where the inspector had found nothing to support the accusations of arson and murder, the enforcement of the draconian Maintenance of Internal Security Act. In the village, education is confined mainly to the upper classes. The marginalised and subaltern classes are deprived of the rudimentary education as the school teacher vehemently chases Narayan and Ishwar away from the school premises for secretly watching the students study in the classroom. 'Shameless little donkeys! Off with you or I'll break your bones' (AFB 109). Despite the lack of elementary education of the untouchables in the village, the narrative projects them as possessing great rationality. During the Partition riots they support the Muslim community and shared same communal spirit rather than the upper class Hindus of the village who inflicted torture on them. The abysmal picture of education in the mountains is shown through Maneck Kohlah who is sent to a boarding school in the city to study Refrigeration and Air Conditioning as his parents understand the worth of job oriented courses but his bitter experiences in the hostel shows the end of Maneck's dream.

Mistry is a commanding chronicler of social and political life. His novel forefront the inhibited situations and establish an exemplary antipathy to the community dominance and control which is closely connected with socio-cultural identity of the Parsis. In Mistry's narrative 'the Parsi by extension becomes a metaphor for the state of the marginal in the post-independent India'. (Wadhawan 78) The narrative 'bring(s) the dalits and the Zoroastrians in the same frame, through which the author gives a panoramic view of the Indian modernity' (Wadhawan 81). One of the noteworthy features of his fiction is that it assimilates the crowded throbbing life of India, 'a tale of mirrored reality of its times' and 'a literary slice of social realism' (Wadhawan 78).

How the political concerns have changed the lifestyle of many are his main thematic concerns. This momentous concern in fascinatingly captured through history-fiction interface. 'Mistry becomes more of a historian than a novelist in his effort to dissolve the polarities of fact and fiction.' (Wadhawan 78) 'Existence', according to Peter Morey, 'is inherently unsteady' so Mistry 'instead of dividing lines between self and other or past and present lives, the novel endorses balance and pattern.' (Morey 105) He delve deep into the human relationships, tries to explore those area where the self is at a loss and presents it with the cultivation of such a wonderful socio-cultural essence intermingled with the beauty and artistry of form and language that gives his novel a perceptive approach and a trendsetter in English literature.

The literary imagination of an author is the outcome of the author's individual talent and response to the tradition, society history and culture in which he is rooted. Mistry has given a new orientation by rejuvenating and exploring the making of a nation. In the process of making he has transformed the inherent cultural subtext of the realist novel and expands the dimensions by including the disempowered poor and working class subaltern. Rohinton Mistry seeks to surmount the stigma of marginality. Mistry with his writing prowess designates the struggle of the Parsis in his all celebrated novels and amalgamates this marginal life process with the history and politics of India. In this sense "the Parsis are twice 'Othered'. They are a minority both in India and within the space of international literature." (Bhautoo-Dewnarain 40) The sharp decline in population made the Parsis scared and the rising communal disharmony has intensified their community consciousness more than ever before. In this regard A. K. Singh comments:

Their works exhibit consciousness of their community in such a way that the community emerges as a protagonist from their works through on the surface these works deal with their human protagonists. (66)

The Parsi in Mistry's works is shown as resistant to alteration as they cling to the antiquated beliefs and rituals given in India's advancement towards a secular modernization and industrialization. Mistry intentionally and emphatically foregrounds the Parsi uniqueness in his narrative through the mention of observances of the Parsi ethnic rituals and occasional use of traditional Parsi words. This is how Mistry explores the resilience of Parsi tradition against the forces of modernity and change. So Mistry's *A Fine Balance* is a journey through the history to the margin where he finds a balance between the loss (pessimism) and the prospect and meaning in life (optimism).

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