

## Politics in Rohitan Mistry's A Fine Balance

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### Abstract

Rohinton Mistry is an Indian writer of Parsi Origin in English. Right now, he is residing in Canada. He migrated to Canada in his early twenties. He migrated there with the intention to become a pop singer, but there was something else awaiting him. He gained prominence in the field of English writing by his novel *A Fine Balance* (1995). The popularity of the novel can be judged from the fact that he was short-listed for the prestigious Booker prize in 1996. This novel is hailed as landmark in the history of Indian fiction as also in Indian Canadian writing. His political and social activism gets reflected in this novel as condemnation of Indian democracy.

Keywords: Identity, Politics, Gender, Caste, Suppression, Power oppression.

Mistry's second novel, *A Fine Balance* is significant landmark in Indian Fiction in English. It was short-listed for the 1996 Booken prize and went to win the commonwealth writer's prize in the same year. It is set in 1975 against the backdrop of Bombay. The novel depicts the prevalent politics of suppression and oppression in India. Here Mistry dwells beyond the Parsi world to talk about how powerful men use political power to crush the common masses.

It deals with every aspect of human experiences and Indian life; its people, climate, cities, ethnicities, classes, regional identities etc. It focuses on the three broad issues of our societies like gender, class and power oppression. Mistry writes this novel with the intention of doing more than simply entertaining because the tone of the novel is primarily political. He prefaces this work 'A fine Balance' with a quotation from Balzac's famous 1835 novel, *Le Pere Goriot*, that deliberately seeks to blur the boundary between truth and fiction:-

“Holding this book in your hand, sinking back in your soft armchair your will say to yourself perhaps it will amuse me. And after you have read this story of great misfortunes, you will no doubt dine well, blaming the author for your own insensitivity, accusing him of wild exaggeration and flights of fancy. But rest assured; this tragedy is not a fiction. All is not a fiction. All is true.’(Mistry preface)

The novel targets the political and social structures of the prevalent society. It traces the fortunes of four characters as they try to survive communal tension, rural to urban migration and downward socio-economic condition. It also explores the state of violence of population control programs and the fragile search for mutual support networks and employment and informal social services in Bombay. It is a downbeat,

Novel that concerns itself with almost unbearable hardship and tragedy, but Mistry manages to entertain through the deployment of style that borders on the ethnographic:-

“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.”

(Mistry 228-229)

Mistry's interest in the impact of the historical waves that wash over the lives of ordinary people, begun in *Such a Long Journey* is continued in *A Fine Balance*. It reveals Mistry's expanding field of vision, now moving beyond Parsi life to embrace the fate of the Indian community at the time of Indira Gandhi's infamous state of Emergency (1975-1977). As John Ball has put it:-

“In its careful exploration of diverse gender, class and religious subject positions it is a much more inclusive work than its predecessor.”

Mistry acknowledges that in his first two books he had focused in detail only on the Parsi community. He comments in an interview with Robert McLeay:

“I made conscious decision in this book to include more than this, mainly because in India seventy five percent of Indians live in villages and I wanted to embrace more of the social reality of India.”

(Wasafiri 18)

This novel leads to more profound reflections on question of belonging in relation to the body politic. This point is reinforced by the novel's focus on lower caste Hindus, Untouchables, Muslims and, of course, Parsis. This is a list of the marginalized and dispossessed who find themselves at the mercy of the Brahminical and pseudo-regular elites shaping India in the 1970's.

Such questions arise with particular poignancy in relation to the role of caste and are explored through the experiences of two of the central characters, the tanners -turned- tailors Ishvar and Omprakash Darji. They have invited the wrath of upper caste people for violating time honoured rules by daring to alter their occupation and thus altering their position in the hierarchical social chain. This leads to the brutal murder of Ishvar and Om's relatives sends them

to the city. In the city they meet a fellow migrant, Maneck Kolah who has arrived there to complete his education at a technical college and lonely parsi widow, Dina Dalal.

They find employment and a temporary home in Dina's flat. Within *A Fine Balance* the promise of modernity and the ways in which that promise is scripted into the management of human lives is articulated through India's uptake of the economies of development are inextricably tied to the individual stories of migration and labour. The novel depicts a great mass of poor workers, excluded from the riches of the development projects for which their labour is vital:-

“The destitute encampments scratched away at the hillsides the people drawn from every direction by stories of construction and wealth and employment. But the ranks of the jobless away exponentially outnumbered the jobs and a hungry army sheltered permanently on the slopes. (215).

The image of the ‘ranks of the jobless’ is pervasive through *A Fine Balance*. For Ishvar and Omprakash, it is the allure of the city and its imagined promise of prosperity that brings them to Bombay. Employment, however, proves elusive and they find themselves amongst the ranks of the hungry army. Early we have found in the novel that the lives of Ishvar and Om are violently disrupted by processes both traditional and modern. Their entire family is murdered in an act of caste violence. They go to Bombay in the hope of a new start and before embarking on their urban experience Mistry shares their dreams of that city:-

“They sat up past midnight, making plans, imagining the new future in the city by the sea, the city that was filled with big buildings, wide , wonderful roads, beautiful gardens, and millions of people working hard and accumulating wealth” (151).

After months of searching for employment while sheltering under an awning the tailors

find work with Dina Dalal and begin to rent a shack in a slum only to have it demolished. They rent a piece of pavement under a shop awning on which to sleep, until they are herded into police vans with the local beggars and homeless and taken to a labour camp, despite their claims to jobs.

The novel is known of its sustained readability and clarity. It wafts the enchanted reader across vast seas of experiences, from the ecstasy of the Indian independence in 1947, to its traumatic Emergency under Indira Gandhi's Congress rule, in 1975. *A Fine Balance* opens with a chapter titled 'Prologue 1975' and ends with 'Epilogue 1984' within its 614 pages lies an account of social and historical developments of a country. In this novel, Mistry tells the truth about India in the mid 1970's.

Though the name of the city in which the hovel is mentioned nowhere. But we have neither difficulty no doubt in identifying the 'city by the sea' as Mumbai. It should be noted that Mistry, Rushdie and Naipaul like to enter India through Mumbai and not through any other city. With the city at the centre Mistry weaves together a subtle and compelling narrative about four unlikely characters who come together soon after the government declares a state of internal Emergency. They are aspiring for different pursuits. Their fates bring them together to 'sail under one flag'.

The novel begins with the image of a woman at her sewing machine. Form that solitary image:-

“ As three more characters (the tailors Ishvar and Omprakash and the parsi student Maneck) entered the picture, four in all seemed a reasonable number to start with. The next question was where and when to place them. In *Such a Long Journey*, the year is 1971. It seemed to me that 1975, the year of the emergency would be the next important year, if one were preparing a list of important dates in Indian history. And so 1975 it was.” (Dodiya 127).

The human endurance of the suffering tailors and others like them who faced the horrors of eviction, sterilization forced labour and police brutality is one of the hallmark of the novel. The novel shows how the underprivileged survive. The novelist's main concern is at the plight of the poor and exploited people. It also shows that forces of privilege combine to suppress the lower caste, the rural and urban poor for self gain. The four main characters of this novel suffer from a sense of rootlessness.

Oppressive caste violence has driven Ishvar and Omprakash from their traditional occupation to learn the skills of tailoring. They go to the overcrowded Bombay from a rural background. Similarly Maneck moves from the invigorating atmosphere of his home in the hills to Bombay for higher education. Dina has grown up in Bombay, but her sense of independence after her husband's death keeps her away from her family. In this way, all the four main characters are lonely and struggling for identity and survival. Social circumstances, loneliness and a sense of rootlessness bring them together. They forge a bond of understanding as they struggle to survive. The human spirit displayed by these four characters of different class backgrounds and ages despite repeated setbacks uphold Mistry's subtle political theme of how human beings can endure and survive with some dignity despite oppressive circumstances. Ultimately the four main characters are struggling to maintain 'a fine balance in their lives. The novel also focusses on the display of various forms of power and violence. Power in *A Fine Balance* is mainly of five types: Exploitative, Manipulative competitive, Nutrient and Integrative.

Exploitative power is the most prevalent type in the novel. This form of power is always associated with force in *A Fine Balance*. The potential of violence is inseparable from exploitative power. The sway of the upper caste Thakurs in Dukhi village is a good example. The Thakurs indulge in a perennial caste war against the 'Untouchables' of the villages.

However, in *A Fine Balance* most upheavals take place because of the imposition of internal emergency. The eviction of the poor from the cities, the forced labour campus, the sterilization are all manifestation of the internal emergency. Here the novelist sharply criticises the Internal Emergency. He shows that all the avowed promises of the Emergency to abolish bonded labour, child labour, sati, dowry system, child marriage. It also abolishes the harassment of backward caste by upper castes which never materialized. Mistry implies that the needless arrogance of the upper castes in trying supremacy led to the consolidation and emergence of the Dalits in Indian politics. The rise of the Dalits as a political and social force in the 1990's in India and the caste warfare in the country side is hinted at by Mistry in Omprakash's contempt and defiance of Thakur Dharamsi on their return to the small town near their ancestral village .

Thus Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* makes an astute political comment because it shows that in rural India the upper castes aggravated social tensions by their insensitive and churlish behaviour. He has transmuted facts of history into significant works of art. The horrors and traumas of Emergency and the prevalent tensions between the upper and lower castes in rural India are deftly chronicled and presented by Mistry in his epic novel, *A Fine Balance*. The ideological concerns of Mistry make him one of the foremost Indian English political novelist of the 1990's.

M. K. Naik in his learned article 'The Political Novel in Indian writing in English' defines this genre as a novel which either has a strong ideological leaning or one which depicts political events. So by traditional definitions, political novels explain how politics works in particular societies.

In this way, *A Fine Balance* is a powerful satire on the Post-Independence political and social dispensation in India, whose decisions affect man in the streets. The first experiment with

the constitutional provision of emergency undertaken by self-serving politicians in the country was a disaster and the novel details the events quite graphically. Mistry has successfully portrayed the reality without mincing words and in doing so he has lodged a powerful protest against the status.

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