

# THE VOICE OF THE MARGINALISED IN ROHINTON MISTRY'S A FINE BALANCE

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## Abstract

Rohinton Mistry, the socio-political novelist, has emerged as a formidable writer in the world literary scene. As an Indian who now lives in and writes from Canada, he is a writer of the Indian Diaspora. His novels are closely linked with the social and political background. Like Nayantara Sahgal, Salman Rushdie, Khushwant Singh and Shashi Tharoor, he is deeply involved with history. Rohinton Mistry is a Parsi by birth and an expatriate Indian writer living in Canada. As a Parsi, he sees himself as a symbol of double displacement and his sense of displacement is a recurring theme in his literary works. His historical situation involves construction of new identity in the nation to which he has migrated and a complex relationship with the political and cultural history of the nation, he has left behind. In his writings he often tries to revise the history of his home land. His spatial and temporal distance from his homeland prods him to undertake a literary journey back home. The voyage into the past is a strategy employed by the immigrant writers to reconstruct and his ethical identity and sense of self for survival in a world that is alien and often hostile. In his stories such as *A Fine Balance* and *Tales from Firozsha Baag*, Mistry articulates the ambivalent space between the two, his characters and narrator, sometimes in spite of himself, is engaged in defining his own hybridity.

**Keywords:** Rohinton Mistry, history, writer.

## INTRODUCTION

In *A Fine Balance*, Mistry focuses on the history of his homeland, his community and family and reveals his diasporic consciousness very minutely. He is authentic in his portrayal of Bombay as he has distanced himself emigrating to Canada and produces the effect of insider as well as outsider in every detail that is engraved in his memory. The novel opens with the train journey and ends with 'epilogue:1984', with Mrs. Dalal closing doors after completing her journey of woman of emancipation and self-realisation. The novel sets in Indira Gandhi's India and more specifically during the time of emergency, is a stark and moving portrait of life during the period. It reflects the reality of India, the

predatory politics of corruption, tyranny, exploitation, violence and bloodshed (212). The novel also gives an insight into rural India focusing on the injustice, the cruelty, and the horror of deprivation and portrays the trauma of India along communal, religious and linguistic lines. Being an expatriate writer, he compares his own native land with Canada. He finds something very peculiar about his country. This is how the history of India forms the basis of his novel *A Fine Balance*. Mistry's *A Fine Balance* records this dark and shameful episode with unrelenting honesty. In an interview soon after the publication of this novel Mistry says:

It seemed to me that 1975, the year of the Emergency would be the next important year, it one was preparing a list of important dates in

Indian History. And so it was 1975 (Gokhale, October 27, 1996. qtd. in Dangwal 72).

Mistry starts to tell the truth about India in the mid-1970's. The novel starts on a note of coincidence. Maneck and the two tailors are sitting in the same compartment of a local train, travelling to the same destination, Dina's house. As is typical in Indian trains, they start conversing and realise they in search of the same address.

Initially both Ishavar and Omprakash are apprehensive that Maneck is a rival for the job. However they become friendly once they realise that Maneck is not seeking employment with Dina. Ishvar, the uncle is initially deferential to Maneck because of the latter's class background. However Omprakash who is more independent does not suffer from an inferiority complex and soon befriends Maneck. The plight and sufferings of Omprakash gives Maneck a wider perspective of life and human suffering. Remaining cheerful and retaining a sense of humour despite excessive adversity are admirable qualities in both Ishvar and Omprakash. Maneck also benefits by participating in Dina's struggle to retain her sense of independence.

The story starts with telling through the cynical voice of the student Maneck, sent to study in Bombay. Dina Dalal is a spirited widow whose refusal to remarry has left her constantly struggling to make a living as a seamstress. She wants to preserve her independence from her dominating brother. In order to complete a big dress making commission, she employs tailors Ishvar and Omprakash, who have come to city hoping to gain employment. and gets inter-connected. She also takes in Maneck, a student from a hill station in the Himalayan foothills, who is sent by his father to attend college to obtain his certification in air-conditioning and refrigeration. Thus those characters from different class backgrounds start interacting with each other and the coincidence does not seem incongruous. So the novel progresses through a series of seemingly separate stories, Dinabai's childhood, romance, early marriage and death of her husband and struggle for survival. She is forced to

discontinue her Matriculation studies and do the household affairs instead on the belief that a woman's role is only domestic and a marriage is the best option to lead her life in society. Nusswan, her domineering and a prejudiced kind of person wants to control her future and he says no to her when she wants to cut her long tresses short. For it, she has to pay price for her act, he beats her badly and tears her clothes and takes her to bathroom for a sacred wash. Mistry presents this scene thus:

He stepped back and flung a mugful of coldwater at her flinched. 'Look at you with your little breasts starting to grow. You think you are a woman already. I should cut them right off, along with your wicked tongue'(A Fine Balance 24).

After that, he eyes her strangely staring at her public hair and this makes her afraid. Later she decides to obey her brother's words and what he wants her to be. The invisible hold of patriarchy has taken to toll. Kate Millet in *Sexual Politics* points out:

Under patriarchy, the female did not develop the symbols by which she is described. As both the primitive and the civilised worlds, the ideas shaped culture, in regard to the female, were also of male design. The image of woman, as we know it, is an image created by men and fashioned to suit their needs. These needs spring from a fear of the "Otherness" of woman. Yet this notion itself presupposes that patriarchy has already been established and the male has already himself as the human norm, the subject and reference to which the female is "Other" or "alien"(46-47).

Her hope in life is rekindled when she finds love in Rustom but her happiness is short lived. Rustom, her husband, dies in an accident on the day of their first wedding anniversary. She is left alone and become devastated. She once again takes refuge in her brother's house as his housekeeper. She is not lucky enough to lead a life of her own: "A month passed, and Dina settled into her old routine, assuming her former place in the household. The servant was let go"(47). As usual she fails to get recognition and consolation from her brother and leads a

life of her own. With the support of her relatives, Shirin Aunty Darab Uncle, she learns tailoring and leads her independent life. Her problem in eyesight makes him hire two tailors to do the business. Her struggle against the patriarchal society brings her complete freedom. She decides to move out of her living place and wants to embark on a journey towards self-reliance and independence. It shows how marginalised like Din

Mistry throws light on village life of Ishvar and Om. Their family belonged to the chammaar caste of tanners and leatherworkers. In the village, the low castes are not allowed to live in the same place where upper castes lived. Even in school in the village, children studying there were also ill treated and beaten up by the teacher. For, "they defiled the slates and chalks, which upper caste children would touch"(113-114). Dukhi, grandfather of Om wants to turn his sons Narayan and Ishvar into tailors. He knows that this society does not allow his progenitors to be suppressed by the traditional power structure of the Indian society. To become tailors in their future. He has seen many people of this village suffer terribly at the hands of Zamindar. Even his wife Roopa is victimised and sexually harassed by the Zamindar's gardener. Om and Ishvar, Shankar and Rajaram, the Beggar master and all others are portrayed in the novel appear to be willing victims who joyfully open their hearts and homes to predators who are their own compatriots and consider it their birthright to exploit these helpless citizens. To flee the caste politics of rural India, Ishvar and Omprakash Darji, who are chamars, come to the metropolis Bombay. Gandhiji's dream about 'harijans' remains a dream. As one of the villagers puts it: "Government passes new laws, says no more untouchability, yet everything is the same. The upper-caste bastards still treat us worse than animals" (The Fine Balance 142).

Two years later when elections take place, Narayan tries to assert his democratic right and cast his own vote instead of abetting the process of rigged elections. For his defiance, Narayan and two other 'Chamars' are forcibly gagged, flogged and tortured. "Burning coals were held to the three men's genitals, and then

stuffed into their mouths" (146), finally in terse prose Mistry describes: The ropes were transferred from their ankles to their necks and the three were hanged. The bodies were displayed in the village square." (146). Not content with such revenge, Thakur Dharamsi unleashes mayhem by his 'Goondas in order to teach those aachhoot jatis a lesson' (146) Narayan's family for defying the existing social order buys an extreme price. Dukhi (Narayan and Ishvar's father), Roopa, Radha and the daughters are bound and burnt alive. Despite new laws regarding untouchability passed by the government, nothing has changed. Exploitation of the low-castes by upper-castes continues unabated. The refusal by low-caste Buddha's wife to go to the field with Zamindar's son results in the shaving of her head and being paraded naked through the square. Again the way of

Roopa, Dukhi's wife, is raped by the watchman of the orchard, tells its own tale of helplessness: "In the morning Roopa behaved as if nothing had occurred. So Dukhi said nothing, and they ate the oranges"(99). Kapadia observes in this regard: "Mistry implies that the needless arrogance of the upper castes in trying to maintain social supremacy led to the consolidation and emergence of the Dalits in Indian politics" (Dodiya 131). The rise of the Dalits as a political and social force in the 1990s in India and the caste warfare in the countryside is hinted at by the novelist Mistry's novel makes an astute political comment because it shows that in rural India, the upper castes aggravated social tensions by their insensitive and churlish behaviour.

The author shows that vested interests combined with the bureaucracy to perpetuate the status quo under the guise of saving the nation from population explosion. Thakur Dharamsi, the upper caste ring leader, achieves respectability as a political leader during emergency because he organizes many sterilization camps. To make the city beautiful, the government deployed officials in the guise of safety inspectors to check the colony. The poor people were tricked into believing that there would be improvement in their houses. As they came out, the bulldozers went in and

the illegal shacks were removed making the occupants homeless. Ishvar and Om take a break of two weeks to go to Ashraf chacha, select bride for Om's marriage. But their bright future is clouded due to the government's massive family planning programme in order to check the population explosion in the country. Twists and turns occur in the life of all. Maneck completes his diploma and returns home and goes to Dubai for job.

Again during the emergency, the family planning programme is used to eliminate the enemies of the establishment. Thakur Dharamsi, uses his superior position to see that Omprakash is castrated, the testicles are removed under the pretext of "a free operation to save his life"(537). His uncle Ishvar's entreaties to the authorities to spare Om remain unheeded. In this way he takes revenge against the lower castes in his village whose only crime was to achieve some social mobility by getting educated and sending their children to be trained as tailors instead of working with leather, their traditional occupation. Thakur Dharamsi cruel misuse of authority shows that the trend of criminalization of politics and the politicization of crime, so rampant in India in the last decade of the twentieth century, started in the period of internal Emergency. Through the series of incident, Mistry exposes a point that nothing has changed for the common people in India and people meet injustice and oppression through various means and this is echoed by one of the characters in the following lines, "Of course, for ordinary people, nothing has changed"(666). The inhumanity is the result of distorting society's balance in accordance with Thakur's machinations. The principal of balance, according to the tradition of the caste system, should be maintained. Here, D'Cruz observes that "the Thakur ordered the torching of Narayan's home and murder of his family in a bid to root out the aspirations of Untouchables for democratic equality"(64)

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 (working with leather) to learn the skills of tailoring and from

a rural background to overcrowded Bombay. 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 accidental death keeps her away from her family. So in a sense all the four main characters are lonely and struggling for Identity and survival, Social circumstances, loneliness and a sense of rootlessness bring them together and forge a bond of understanding as they struggle to survive the human spirit displayed by the four characters of different class backgrounds and ages, despite repeated setbacks upholds 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 finebalance's in their lives. The novel begins with a quotation from Balzac's *Le Pere Goriot*:

Holding this book in your hand, sinking back in your soft arm chair, you 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 fiction. All is true (A Fine Balance).

On a visit back home, Om and Ishvar are sterilised forcibly. Ishvar gets sterilised in order to fill the day's quota of vasectomies. His legs become affected with gangrene after the hasty operation. It is the dirt ridden surgical instruments that brought on the rotting of his flesh. Due to this problem, he cannot work as a tailor. In spite of this personal setback Ishvar does not lose his hope. Om Prakash, having attained the apt age for marriage, is pushed into an operating table and sterilised against his will. His testicles are removed and become eunuch.

The ending of the novel is startling and unconventional. Maneck Kohlah, the brooding Parsi Youngman, is upset at the alienation from his family. His sorrows increase, when he revisits Mumbai from Dubai and finds that Dina has been evicted from her house. Walking

away from Dina's house, he is further perturbed at seeing Ishvar and Omprakash handicapped and working as beggars. The culmination of these series of staggering events is that it drives him to extreme despair and he commits suicide by throwing himself in front of a train. This extreme act has been criticized for making the novel very morbid. "However, it is Mistry's way of showing how a member of the privileged middle class, the sensitive Maneck, lost out in the struggle to maintain a fine balance between hope and despair" (qtd. in Dodiya 133). Rohinton Mistry emerges as the foremost Parsi political novelist for his consistent depiction of ideology and politics in his novels.

Finally all the four characters are lonely and struggling so hard for their own identity and survival. Social circumstances, loneliness and a sense of rootlessness bring them together and forge a bond of understanding as they face difficult situation in their life. A kind of spirit shown by these four people of different class backgrounds and ages, despite repeated setbacks upholds Mistry's subtle political theme of how human beings can endure and survive with some dignity despite aggressive measures taken by the External factors.

Thus Dina Lal, by the end of the novel has lost her prized independence and had to seek shelter in the patriarchal protection of her elder brother Nusswan. Om Prakash is castrated in an act symbolic of the impotency of the general populace of India during the authoritarian regime of Indira Gandhi's Emergency, Ishwar is crippled by the loss of both his legs and is reduced to begging for a living and Maneck, the boy from the Himalayas, throws himself in front of a moving train in a grotesque parody of the reported death sequence of his friend, Avinash. The overall scenario is grim. If a fine balance must be maintained between hope and despair, the end of the novel fortifies the balance.

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