

REFLECTION OF COMMUNITY AND THE NATIONAL HISTORY IN ROHINTON MISTRY'S A FINE BALANCE

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Abstract

In this paper, an attempt is made to discuss how Rohinton Mistry interweaves both the history of a community and a nation in the narrative structure of his novel, *A Fine Balance*. Published in 1995, the novel is set against the backdrop of the Emergency years, which shook the Indian nation. The novel recounts the lives and struggles of four unlikely characters, revealing the vicissitudes of Parsi life as well as the distress of the ordinary citizens of India during the despotic rule of Indira Gandhi. Unlike his other works, Mistry does not confine himself only to Bombay city and the Parsi community but also tries to explore rural India, showcasing the unheard cries of the lower-caste untouchables in the narrative. Though the novel focuses more on the excesses of the Emergency and the sufferings of the outcast, it also highlights the lifestyle of the Parsis, their exclusivity and superiority complex, and their alienation from the mainstream Indian culture. Emerging from the Bombay Parsi community, Mistry can sense the plight of the Parsis as a minority community in India, and he is narrating the dangers affecting his community in his writings. As a socio-political realist, Mistry in the novel, vividly explores the untold suffering of the Indian masses from the time of the Partition in 1947 up to the assassination of Indira Gandhi in 1984, revealing the deceit and the two-facedness of the politicians and the higher authorities that ransacked the nation, exploiting the democratic rights of the ordinary people. In fact, Mistry is chronicling the history of the Parsi community and certain decades of post-independent Indian history in the novel.

Key words: Community, Parsi, Exclusivity, Emergency, Despotic, Alienation.

INTRODUCTION:

In this paper, an attempt is made to discuss how Rohinton Mistry incorporates Parsi life as well as Post-independence Indian history in the narrative structure of his novel *A Fine Balance*. Rohinton Mistry is a promising Parsi writer from the Indian diaspora who has expanded the range of Indian writing in English as well as Parsi fiction. Quite similar to his contemporary writers Bapsi Sidhwa, Amitabh Ghosh, and Vikram Seth "who write about India as an insider-outsider with a double perspective, often achieving the desirable mixture of involvement and distance, inwardness and detachment" (Pandya 2001: 179), Mistry chooses Indian themes and Indian life for his literary creations. Emerging from the near extinct minority Parsi community, Mistry is trying to present and record different aspects of Parsi life and the history of a nation in his writings. His novels remind us of what Henry James once said, "it is impossible to what a novelist takes himself to be unless he regards himself as a historian and his narratives as history (qtd. in Miller 1995: 250). His community consciousness is evident in all of his works. Mistry's fictionalisation of historical events in India by telling a more accurate description of the circumstances from the perspective of a minority community is what makes his writings very distinctive.

Mistry's second novel, *A Fine Balance*, chronicles both the history of a community and a nation. Unlike his other works, Mistry does not confine himself only to Bombay city and the Parsi community but also tries to explore rural India. Commenting on this, Mistry himself says in an interview: "I made a conscious decision in this book to include more than this, because in India seventy-five percent of Indians live in villages and I wanted to embrace more of the social reality of India" (McClay 2004: 204). The sufferings of the Parsis and the untouchables are brought together by setting the novel against the backdrop of the declaration of Emergency in 1975 during Indira Gandhi's regime. The novel recounts the lives and struggles of four unlikely characters: Dina Dalal, a Parsi widow; Maneck Kohla, a Parsi student; and the two tailors, Ishvar and Om, both belonging to the Chammar caste. The novel narrates the story of how these characters developed their friendship despite their differences and helped each other during the turbulent years of Emergency. The declaration of the Emergency gave a death blow to the lives of all these characters, and they suffered extremely.

The narrative captures Indian reality from the time of partition up to the assassination of Indira Gandhi in 1984. Set during the Emergency years, the novel reveals the dark secrets of Indira Gandhi, Sanjay Gandhi, and the Congress government challenging the historical records to relate the untold truth. Regarding the plot and structure of the novel, K.C. Belliappa says, "A Fine Balance attempts to locate the lives of its characters in a historical context" (2007: 205). In the narrative, Mistry is exposing how the Congress government led by Indira Gandhi exploited the nation by proclaiming an Emergency under the false pretext of maintaining the nation's internal security. At a time when the opposition leaders and other groups were fervently calling for Indira's resignation, she imposed a state of Emergency only to retain her power. During the Emergency years, the brutality of those

who are in power devastated the innocent lives of the downtrodden and there was complete deterioration, and all this is loathed by Mistry. Indira Gandhi's misuse of her power is seriously condemned by Mistry through various characters in several sections of the novel. To cover all her defects, the media was being censored, and everything was controlled by her. In the name of maintaining internal security, every form of protest was banned, and all the agitators, including the opposition leaders, student activists, and various other groups, were arrested. In the narrative, Maneck's friend Avinash, who was a student leader, was murdered by the forces of the government, and his body was found near the railway tracks. Thus, Mistry reveals the uncertain lives of the helpless common people during those years. Mistry's hardest criticism lies in his depiction of the family planning programme initiated by Sanjay Gandhi. The way the beggars, the slum dwellers, and the poor people were forcibly put under knives is vehemently criticised by Mistry. Even the doctors were threatened to perform surgeries with half-boiled instruments, and the patients were not treated well. The City Beautification Programme launched by the government crushed the lives of the homeless by using them as forced labourers in the name of giving jobs. Mistry launches his attack on the government for the ill treatment of the helpless people. In the novel, the agonies of the four major characters despite their relentless endeavours to find peace and security in a chaotic nation, indicate the hardship of the ordinary people during those dreadful years. In the narrative, Ishvar and Om Prakash are the worst sufferers. The harsh reality of the Emergency years, where the poor and the downtrodden were crushed down, is realistically shown through the distressed lives of Ishvar and Om. They are reduced to beggars despite their relentless efforts to live a better life because of the insensitiveness of the government. Through the lives and misfortunes of these characters, Mistry shows his condemnation of social inequalities that existed in Indian society in the form of caste barriers. Even though laws were created to combat the caste system, it still exists years after India gained its independence. Mistry is focusing on this serious flaw. Despite not being a Dalit, Mistry explores the lives of the lower-castes that have been betrayed. Mistry's portrayal of rural India and his description of the plight of the lower-castes are questioned by some critics and particularly, Nilufer Bharucha claims that: "it is not given to all writers to expound with authority on the underbelly of society, especially if they do not have first-hand experience of it. This section of the text sadly lacks in authority and authenticity" (2003: 152). However, Mistry's observation of social reality cannot be subdued by such claims. According to Salman Rushdie, "Literature is self-validating. That is to say a book is not justified by its author's worthiness to write it, but by the quality of what has been written. There are terrible books that arise directly out of experience, and extraordinary imaginative feats dealing with themes which the author has been obliged to approach from the outside" (1991:14). Thus, Mistry is trying to expose the ills of Indian society and he is magnifying his lens in this novel. The Corruption and brutality of the Indian leaders are constantly criticized by Mistry throughout the novel.

The novel opens with "The Prologue: 1975" and ends with "The Epilogue: 1984." The excessiveness and callousness of Indira Gandhi during her despotic rule are exposed, and the atrocities inflicted upon the poor and the helpless are retold from the perspectives of the victims, revealing the hidden truth behind those cruel incidents. She is being blamed for creating Sikh terrorists to create trouble for the state government, and when the situation got out of her control, she ordered to bombard the Golden Temple to eliminate the Sikh separatists hiding in the temple. The incident deeply hurt the sentiments of the Sikhs, and she was assassinated by her Sikh bodyguards in retaliation for her infamous crimes, which caused Delhi's Sikh population to be slaughtered in large numbers. The massacre of Sikhs by the Hindus in Delhi, the nexus between the police and the rioters and the plight of the Sikhs during the anti-Sikh riot in 1984 are realistically presented in the novel. By focusing on those terrible years, the novel serves as a critique of the socio-political unrest that characterized post-independent India.

Though the novel focusses more on the excesses of the Emergency and the suffering of the outcasts, it also highlights the lifestyle of Parsis, their exclusivity, superiority complex, and their alienation from the Indian masses. The novel asserts the unique identity of the Parsis by asserting the core aspects of the religious rites and rituals of the community. Savita Goel opines that "In this novel, like his earlier works, the writer once again succeeds in recreating Parsi ambiance. The rich culture, customs and traditions of the marginalized Parsi community are foregrounded and scenes describing the Parsi death rites and funeral ceremonies give the reader a glimpse into the Parsi worldview" (qtd. in Chakravorty 2004: 30). Through the lives and struggles of Dina and Maneck, Mistry can highlight the plight of the Parsis as a minority community in independent India. The lives of the political parties are affected during the cruel period of the Emergency. Dina's struggle to maintain her economic self-reliance remains only a dream because of the declaration of Emergency. Dina Dalal's father was a doctor, and she was her father's favourite and spent a very comfortable life, but after the sudden demise of her father, she experienced the harsh reality of life as she was living under the care of her dominating brother, Nusswan. The patriarchal Parsi society, where women and girls are treated as inferior to males, is vividly portrayed. Though the community is considered to be the most modernised and educated community in India, there exists gender bias and inequality of rights to parental properties. Nusswan takes over the family's fortune, and Dina is deprived of her rights. As a rebellion against her brother, she chooses Rustom Dalal as her life partner despite the repeated warnings given by her brother, but unfortunately, Rustom died in an accident, and Dina remained single despite her brother's constant efforts to get her remarried. He felt helpless and disturbed seeing her strange idea of independence. Dina's rebellious nature made him restless, and he constantly reminded her to abandon her childish nature: " Do you know how fortunate you are in our community? Among the unenlightened, widows are thrown away like garbage. If you were a Hindu, in the old days you would have had to be a good little sati and leap into your husband's funeral pyre, be roasted with him" (AFB 52). Mistry is narrating the community's

feeling of superiority over other Indian communities by indicating the ill-treatment of widows among the Hindus. Nilufer Bharucha states:

Nusswan's words reflect the deep-rooted Parsi feeling of the superiority of their 'enlightened' religion versus what they consider the superstitious, exploitative nature of the Hindu religion and its treatment of widows. However, his words are ironical since Dina considers Nusswan to be an oppressor and the 'unenlightened' one and offers to take herself off to the Towers of Silence. 2003: 149-150 Unable to cope with her brother's tormenting attitude, Dina left the place and started to live in her husband's flat. Dina is portrayed as a modern lady who defies all the traditional norms of a Parsi family. To manage her life she took up tailoring work, but due to her failing eyes, she faced a lot of difficulties and during this critical juncture, her friend Zenobia introduced her to Mrs. Gupta, and she got a contract from Au Revoir's Export Company. To smoothly handle her business, Ishvar and Om are hired as her assistants. She also kept Maneck as a paying guest in her flat. Thus, the four protagonists were brought together under a single roof during the terrific years of the Emergency.

Through the life story of Maneck, Mistry is attempting to explore the expatriate Parsis' alienation, displacement, and identity crisis in India as well as in their newly adopted countries. Maneck's father, Farokh Kohla owned a great fortune before the partition of India in 1947, but after independence, all the family properties remained on the other side of the border, and he was heartbroken. The anger and trauma of the Parsis after the end of the British rule in India are well conveyed through the traumatised life of Farokh Kohla. It is a well-known fact that the Parsis were the most advanced and wealthiest community in India during the British Raj. They had also contributed a lot to developing the nation. However, in independent India, the Parsis are struggling to cope with their degraded positions and they are living a painful life, unable to adjust to the chaotic socio-political unrest prevailing in Indian societies. Here in the narrative, Farokh Kohla cannot fully recover from his trauma and cannot tolerate the changing scenarios. Kohla's "Kaycee", which had a reputation for being the best in and around their small hill station, was severely affected by the arrival of a large Cola manufacturing company. Though Maneck had plans to upgrade their family business, his father warned him not to indulge in business and insisted that he should focus on his studies. The Parsis' plight in independent India is clearly revealed through Mr. Kohla's words, "You see in the Past, it is easier to plan for the future. Nowadays, things are more complicated, too much uncertainty" (AFB: 222). Maneck is sent to Mumbai for further studies. After completing his diploma, Maneck returns to his hometown but he is again sent to Dubai for a better future.

In the epilogue to the novel, Maneck is seen visiting India after spending eight years in Dubai to participate in the funeral ceremony of his father. Mistry cleverly makes Maneck's arrival at a crucial period in Indian history so that he can interweave the anti-Sikh riots that broke out in 1984 into the storyline. There is a loophole in Mistry's plot construction that Maneck's staying away from India cannot be a justified reason for his failure to get the news of such a serious crisis in India. It is quite ironic to think that if he cut all contacts with his native land, then how he could get the news of his father's death. Be though as it may be, Mistry's description of riot-torn Delhi is authentic. He chooses a Sikh character to be the taxi driver who drove Maneck to the railway station. Through the mouthpiece of this taxi driver, Mistry narrates the gory details of the massacre of the innocent Sikhs following the brutal murder of Indira Gandhi by her Sikh bodyguards. The mischiefs of Indira Gandhi, which claimed her life, are vividly exposed through their discussions.

After being exiled from his homeland, Maneck's life is full of chaos and confusion as he is torn between the two worlds. Mistry is revealing the identity crisis, confusion, and sense of loss experienced by the expatriate Parsis through the troubled life of Maneck. In the narrative, Mistry also tries to bring in the controversial debate on the funerary practice of the Parsis. Mrs. Kohla plans to cremate her husband by defying the traditional practice of exposing the dead body on the Tower of Silence. Most of the Parsi dastoors decline to offer their services for deviating from the traditional practice. Thus, the internal conflict among the Parsis is clearly explored in the novel. Maneck's troubled life becomes unbearable when he visits Bombay to meet Dina. The miserable and painful lives of Dina, Ishvar, and Om torment him, and he feels completely lost. During the Emergency years, Dina lost her struggle for independence, and she returned to her brother's place. Both Ishvar and Om were also crushed by the circumstances, and they are seen begging in the city. Maneck loses his patience and cannot face the situation anymore, and he ends his life by jumping onto a running train. In all his works, Mistry tries to highlight the degeneration of the Parsi community in post-independent India. The pathetic circumstances under which the middle-class Parsis are living are clearly exposed in his works. Though the Parsis had contributed in many sectors in developing the nation, the changing attitude of Parsis in independent India, their lack of enthusiasm and spirit, is deeply lamented by Mistry. Mistry's description of the Sodawalla family, Maneck's mother's relatives in the city, clearly indicates Mistry's angst as these people have "no fizz, dull as a flat soda, in danger of boring themselves to death" (600). Mistry also brings in another aspect of the community, which threatens the community's bleak and gloomy future. The serious threat to the community is its declining population. Late marriage, high rate of unmarried men and women, migration, infertility, and preference for small families are the reasons behind this serious issue. Here, in the narrative, Dina strongly opposed her brother's advice to remarry and have children; Maneck also ends his life before getting married. Faredoon is also shown as a bachelor, Rustom's Darab Uncle and Auntie have also no children of their own. The declining birth rate among the Parsis is a serious concern for the community, as the community's population is declining sharply. Mistry has dealt with this issue in all his works. Thus, Mistry has portrayed in all seriousness the status of the Parsis in independent India.

Quite common with his fellow Parsi writers, Mistry narrates his community, showcasing the diverse hues of Parsi life. Mistry is a brilliant writer and a humanist who tries to bring out the evils of Indian society without any fear. His account of the Indian reality from the perspective of a minority community questions all established social and political creeds of those in power. According to Salman Rushdie, "Writers and politicians are natural rivals. Both groups try to make the world in their own image; they fight for the same territory. And the novel is one way of denying the official politician's version of truth"(1991:14). Mistry is an outspoken novelist, and he skilfully constructed the plot of the novel to portray the reality. His versions of certain incidents also challenge and reject the existing narratives. Thus, Mistry's novel is a renarration of the history of a community and a nation.

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