

STRIKING A FINE BALANCE: EXISTENTIAL CRISIS IN THE MIDST OF INEQUITIES AND INJUSTICES IN ROHINTON MISTRY’S A FINE BALANCE

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Abstract:

Rohinton Mistry is a renowned Indian –Canadian author known for his powerful and emotionally resonant novels. His notable works include “Such a Long Journey”, “A Fine Balance,” and "Family Matters." Mistry's writing often explores themes of family, identity, social issues, and the human experience. His novels are praised for their rich character development and insightful narratives, making him a significant figure in contemporary literature. The article explores the protagonist's existential crisis, which they confront in their personal, social, and national life in their search for identity in the novel A Fine Balance. The hidden desires of the underdogs and their cherished aspiration for a delightful life weave the centrality of the novel.

Keywords: Existential Crisis, Identity, Social Issues and Cherished Aspirations.

Introduction:

Rohinton Mistry was born in a Parsi family in 1952. He obtained a British-style education at the University of Bombay by studying Mathematics and Economics. In 1975, at the age of 23, he immigrated to Canada, where he studied at the University of Toronto and received a B.A degree in English and philosophy. Mistry started to write short stories at the age of 37. Mistry began his literary career with the publication of a collection of short stories. Tales from Firozsha Baag (1987) was published later in the United States as Swimming Lessons and Other Stories from Firozsha Baag (1989). His novels are Such a Long Journey (1991), A Fine Balance (1995), and Family Matters (2002). Mistry won the Governor General's Award and the Common Wealth Writer’s Prize for the best book, and the novel was shortlisted for the Booker Prize. His entire novels have a coherent entity. The three novels deal with Parsi people's lives, culture, and religion. The recurring patterns of

images, situations, characters, the almost unchanging locale, and the communities of Mistry's fiction have led critics to consider his novels as a trilogy, a coherent whole.

A Fine Balance is the story of Dina Dalal, a Parsi widow in her forties; Maneck Kohlah, who belongs to a worthy Indian hill town; and Ishvar and his nephew Om, the 'Chamaars turned tailors,' are from a remote rural area. Throughout his novel, Mistry has interwoven several stories, and each of these stories relates the characters' fortunes and misfortunes to the places that give meaning to their lives.

Implementation:

Mistry highlights crucial events in the country's chronicle by depicting the background of each protagonist. The lives of the tailor's forefathers reflect the tyranny of the caste system in rural India, where unimaginable horrors are perpetuated on the lower castes. Dina's past underlines the sense of squalor and failure that the middle class often faces rather helplessly in an underdeveloped nation struggling to improve its economic status. In Maneck Kohlah's background lies the pathetic story of India's partition, where religion became the unnatural reason for the birth of a nation.

Mistry focuses on the various forms of power and violence that his protagonists encountered in their lives. Exploitative power is the most prevalent type in the novel. The sway of the upper caste Thakur in Dukhi's village is a good example. For the Thakur, exploitation follows a thorough understanding of the conditions of the lower castes: their poverty, ignorance, and ill health. If exploitative power depends on violence, manipulative power occurs more covertly. As Rollo May argues, this power is "originally invited by the person's own desperation or anxiety." This power is over another person. Nusswan (Dina's brother) illustrates this power. Nusswan runs and controls the family after his father's death. He even regulates Dina's money, dresses, education, and even her friendships. Nusswan's monetary assistance helps him retain his hold over her. Finally, competitive power can also be constructive because it produces a healthy rivalry between people, thus improving productivity. The Kohlah family ruins its business because they do not envisage competition. Maneck's father refuses to compete with rivals, regarding it as "absolutely undignified like begging." Here, the absence of competition power spells doom.

A Fine Balance can be read as an expression of the predicament of the self in the Indian urban/rural context. Initially, the individuals desire self-affirmation. A great deal of self-consciousness is involved here. Dina's early moves at being "Independent ."The family of the lower caste Dukhi wishes to possess a certain dignity. Maneck, likewise, wants to move from the father's shadow to create space for himself. Dina Shroff seems to be a kernel of the novel who is destined to redeem the lot of denied destitute. Om and Ishvar, the two tailors, who all the time in Bombay to locate the whereabouts of Dina. Dina initiates her relationship by giving

them the work of tailoring. Maneck Kohlah becomes a paying guest in the house of Dina.

Coming from diverse social and cultural backgrounds, the four characters are suspicious and apprehensive of each other. In a sense, all four main characters are lonely and struggling for identity and survival. Social circumstances bring them together, and in time, they forge a bond of understanding as they struggle to survive. One character is identical to another in his/her struggle and capacity to survive. Mistry presents a panoramic picture of the poor struggling in the metropolitan city where a roof to cover the head is a dream. On 27 June 1975, Mrs. Gandhi declared a state of Emergency. The day after the Government of India declares a state of internal Emergency. Dina comes to know through Maneck the long-drawn suffering of Ishvar and Om as victims of caste oppression and thinks: "Compared to theirs, my life is nothing but comfort and happiness.... People keep saying God is great, God is just, but I'm not sure".

The protagonists discover that there are other forces at play larger than their individual selves. The tailors realize that life is far more difficult in the city as compared to their village. There is no end to their miseries and woes. Soon, they adapt themselves to the circumstances, and still, they hope to realize their long-cherished dream of becoming rich and powerful in Bombay.

The Emergency intrudes obtrusively into the lives of all characters, leading to their eventual loss and destruction. Emergency, a defense of an insecure leader, disturbs the coherence of the routine of the poor people. Maneck and Dina are only the indirect victims of the Emergency as their lives are dependent on the lives of the tailors Om and Ishvar. All of them are aware of something stifling their lives, though they cannot link it to the existing political scenario of the country. Their struggle for survival, as far as they are concerned, does not have a political angle to it. They all believe that the oft-heard word emergency is a sort of game played by the people in power. For Dina, the much-spoken Emergency is "Government problems – games played by people in power. It does not affect ordinary people like us". [AFB 1995: 75].

All fundamental rights were strictly limited by the mere proclamation of Emergency- under Article 352 of the constitution. It is estimated that during the Emergency, more than 10,000 persons were jailed without trial. The next phase of destruction came in the guise of city beautification projects, which led to massive demolition; in certain cities, thousands of people were displaced in the process. Another dark chapter of those days was the forceful drive to control India's population by enforced sterilization. It is estimated that more than a million people were forcibly sterilized. The eviction of the poor from the cities, the forced labor camps, and the sterilizations are all manifestations of the internal Emergency. The

India that Mistry projects in *A Fine Balance* is filled with despair, brutality, discrimination, injustice, and lack of opportunity for its people.

Each of the four protagonists is trying to merge together their past, present, and future, the distinctions of caste, creed, and gender, to create harmony and symphony in existence. The leveling of the hierarchies of gender and caste is made possible by the gradual release of sympathy and respect between Dina and the tailors, aided by Maneck acting as a moral catalyst. In the end, personal kindness and sympathy fail as solutions, not because they are shown to be inadequate, but because the political chaos of the Emergency intervenes like an uncontrollable and irritational force to frustrate the personal quest for a *modus Vivendi*.

The Journey of the protagonist Dina from Dina Shroff and Dina Dalal presents a fine blending of realistic and mythical modes of narratives. The hardships and suffering of her life are balanced through the description of her memorable moments of romance and marriage. As refugees from constricting caste, Ishvar, and Om Prakash, as leather workers, transgressively transformed into tailors. The transition in the spirit of the "Chamaar turned tailor" makes them adopt the change and survive as beggars. Despite all crises, the less fortunate Ishvar, without legs, and Om, without his "manhood," face life with more courage. The sufferings of the tailors give Maneck a wider perspective of life and human suffering. The travails of Om, Ishvar, and Dinabai make Maneck realize his own problems of alienation from his father and lack of adjustment with his college mates. Unable to confront these realities, Maneck sees a way out of suicide. As Mistry points out, there are thousands of Ishvar's and Om's in India today.

The heavy irony in this novel is that -an equipped member to succeed economically kills himself, which contrasts with the less fortunate who survive by achieving a 'fine balance' between hope and despair. Life in India for poor man, Mistry suggests, is not less than "tight rope walking" – it is an act of balancing and juggling.

Conclusion:

The motto and mission of life is to enjoy love and laughter. Although the two tailors survive as beggars on the streets and Dina is sentenced as a domestic drudge, all three characters explore the necessity to adapt to change for their survival and growth. Tomorrow is beyond the clutch of the human hand, and they may be quite late.

References:

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