



Research Paper

Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance*: Privileging the Marginalised Voice

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Abstract:

The Indian freedom struggle is venerated as a watershed moment in Indian history because it changed the contours of social, political, and economical segments of the modern nation-state formed after independence. This research paper aims to recapitulate the post-independence India, especially from the 1970s to 1980s fraught with anarchy and socio-political disturbances. The purpose of this historical study is to analyse the fiction contrived by internationally acknowledged Indo-Canadian writer, Rohinton Mistry. Being a Parsi fictional writer who mostly focuses on minority consciousness, Mistry chose to embrace the larger socio-political historicity of India in his novel. *A Fine Balance* published in 1995 primarily commemorates the indomitable human spirit during the breeze of the Internal Emergency and encapsulates the very essence of human life which is to constantly create an equilibrium between hope and despondency. Characters portrayed in the novel can be observed seeking a balance in one's life amidst brutal misfortunes while residing in a tribe which was changing after Indian independence. The novel also delimitates the perpetuation of colonial legacies of governance and domination by the Indian ruling class. It exposes hypocrisy and corruption sustained by the supreme machinery and also highlights the internal cracks in the Indian secular space. This paper incorporates the study of Postcolonialism, Trauma Studies, and Modernism to uncover the inequalities existing in coeval India to deconstruct Rohinton Mistry's undeniable engagement with some of the major Indian historical events in his novel to represent Indian sensibilities through his magnificent art of storytelling.

Keywords: political turmoil, human spirit, struggle, government machinery, patriarchy

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I. Introduction:

"Mistry is a writer who's interested in telling stories...stories about the human heart and the human mind and how we all struggle in this world whether we are migrants or bank workers, beggars or college students, tailors or pavement artists." (Upadhyay, 52). *A Fine Balance* (1995) is Rohinton Mistry's second masterpiece which deals with the political turmoil of post-independence India, especially during the second half of the twentieth century. As we all know that every coin has two sides; similarly, the Indian independence movement emerged successful in bringing freedom from British rule on the one hand but, on the other hand, it failed to repair some of the major internal cracks or inequalities existing in Indian society. Rohinton Mistry is giving a voice and visibility to the peripheral lower-middle class of Indian society in all his novels. Mistry's leading characters are fighters and strugglers against injustices and corruption. The novelist is not only portraying the inequalities existing in contemporary India but he is also showcasing the unity of multicultural Indian society and their defence mechanism to combat against the various misfortunes of life. As nostalgia, alienation, diaspora, politics and marginalisation form the basic tenet of Rohinton Mistry's novels, his creation of Gustad Noble in *Such a Long Journey*, remains unshaken in the face of countless vicissitudes of life and is a representative of ordinary Indian middle-class citizens whose life is beset with problems. In Mistry's novels, corruption extends from one microscopic sector of society to another like a contagious virus where we read: "Municipal corruption was only a microcosmic manifestation of the greed, dishonesty, and moral turpitude that flourished at the country's centre . . . from the very top, whence all power flowed, there also dripped the pus of putrefaction, infecting every stratum of society below." (*Such a Long Journey*, 312-13). Likewise, characters like Omprakash, Ishvar, and Dina portrayed in *A Fine Balance* possess the indomitable human spirit to confront the relentless hurdles faced by a common man during the National Emergency.

Socio-Political Unrest in Post-independence India:

Revisiting the Indian history, one can undoubtedly exclaim that India has sprung a long way fighting several misfortunes since British colonialism. Breaking the cynical manacles of subservience, the Indian freedom struggle deeded with the birth of a new nation-state that again fought various battles like the Indo-China War (1962-1968), the Indo-Pak War of 1971, and Internal Emergency proclaimed by Indira Gandhi. Rohinton Mistry embarks with these historical anecdotes in his novels to depict their impact on human lives. *"And riots in the city-curfews and lathi charges and burning buses everywhere. What the dreadful year 1962 had been. And such a humiliating defeat, everywhere people talking of nothing but the way the Chinese had advanced, as though the Indian Army consisted of tin soldiers."* (*Such a Long Journey*, 9). Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed, India's president at the time, gave his approval to Indira Gandhi's proclamation of an internal emergency on June 25, 1975. The order gave the Prime Minister the authority to rule by decree. Several Indian citizens' democratic rights were violated, political opponents were imprisoned, elections were cancelled, civil liberties were suspended, press, film, and other kinds of art were censored, and elementary rights were also adjourned at this time. Rohinton Mistry rummages political unrest and its consequences on the populace in his book *A Fine Balance*. Imposing the law, anyone may be detained without a trial. Even the order to prettify the city rendered so many poor migrants homeless. That emancipated the predicament of people who were living on the roadsides; then appeared the most horrific night of noises that were strangers on the street. Police jeeps and a truck roared down the road and parked across from the chemist's. Sergeant Kesar barked short, sharp instructions to his men; the constables' sticks thudded hollowly on cardboard boxes sheltering sleepers along the pavement; heavy steps in regulation footwear pounded the footpath. The noises, like menacing interlopers, barged their way into the tailor's slumber. Ishvar and Omprakash awoke to tremble as though from a worst dream and crouched terribly behind the nocturnal watchman. *"What's happening? What do you see?"* they asked him. He peered around the entrance. *"Looks like they are waking all the beggars. They are beating them, pushing them into a truck."* (*A Fine Balance*, 217). It is carried out not to arrange for a champion place for all of them. Instead they are sold out to a contractor by bribing the facilitator and Sergeant Kesar. Including the lunatics, the blind and children are loaded up: *"those blind ones are fine. Blindness is no problem, they can do things with their hands. Children also, many little works for them."* (*A Fine Balance*, 218) The politics of terror represents the cultural and collective trauma of the Indian people who sickened during the National Emergency. The plight of the beggars and the other physically weaker people revealed how the binary is perpetrated in the social hierarchy. But the atrocity goes to the pinnacle when the police compel Ishvar and Omprakash to get into the truck due to the shortage in the count which should have been ninety-six. Though they deny that they were not beggars but serving as tailors, the police don't pay attention at all. They would be told that sleeping on the streets is illegal. When the tailors try to explain the reason for sleeping in such a place, Sergeant Kesar would twist it as yet another breach of law: *"Police-sahab, we are sleeping here only because your men came with machines and destroyed our Jhopadpatti. What? You lived in a Jhopadpatti? Two wrongs don't make right. You could get double punishment."* (*A Fine Balance*, 219) the power being sanctioned to the government wing which is bestowed with enormous muzzle power, nothing but such repressive tendency would only be geared up. Freud and Breuer emphasise in the psychoanalytical publication, *Studien über Hysterie (Studies on Hysteria)* that the key event was not traumatic in itself but only in its reminiscence. Because the original sequel continues to inflict harm, the talking cure is required to fathom the effects of the past and gain freedom from its symptoms. The fact is that history is an affair of perspective and there can be several perspectives depending on the circumstances one has gone through in the past. So, there is no one true history. Fictional writers bring up narratives from their perspectives. A fictional work should not be judged based on official truth. The primary focus of the novel is the predicaments of the inferior middle class who were struggling to sustain their livelihood and existence in so-called independent Indian era. Mistry exposes the hypocrisy of government machinery which thrived on nepotism and greed for power. This reminds us of Ania Loomba who said that *"The newly independent nation state makes available the fruits of liberation only selectively and unevenly; the dismantling of colonial rule did not automatically bring about changes for the better in the status of women, the working class, or the peasantry in most colonized countries."* (Loomba, 29) Mistry has depicted legacies of colonialism perpetuated by authoritative politicians in post-independence India violating the ideals of democracy. He has described rural society colliding with urban society due to global urbanisation. People were migrating from villages to metropolis to evade from caste incongruity which were more manifested in rustic India; as when the protagonist Dukhi's spouse Roopa who attempts to steal oranges for Ishvar and being raped by the man who was hired to overlook the grove of oranges, Dukhi didn't able to console her or raise his voice as he recognized his status: *"Dukhi pretended to be asleep as she entered the hut. He heard her muffled sobs several times during the night, and knew, from her smell, what had happened to her while she was gone. He felt the urge to go to her, speak to her, comfort her. But he did not know what words to use, and he also felt afraid of learning too much. He wept silently, venting his shame, anger, humiliation in tears; he wished he would die that night."* (*A Fine Balance*, 99) Even the birth of Narayan brings a new kind of offence on Dukhi's head as: *"Perhaps the Chamaar had journeyed afar and kidnapped a Brahmin's newborns—this would explain everything."* (*A Fine Balance*,

100), because the news of a second son created envy in upper-caste homes where marriages had also taken place around the time Dukhi and Roopa were wed, but where the women were still childless. And the Pandits advise a more straight observation of the dharmic order in the Darkness of Kaliyug. As a result, *"the village saw a sharp increase in the number of floggings meted out to members of the untouchable castes, as the Thakurs and Pandits tried to whip the world into shape. The crimes were varied and imaginative: a Bhunghi had dared to let his unclean eyes meet Brahmin eyes; a Chamaar had walked on the wrong side of the temple road and defiled it; another had strayed near a puja that was in progress and allowed his undeserving ears to overhear the sacred shlokhas; a Bhunghi child had not erased her footprints cleanly from the dust in a Thakur's courtyard after finishing her duties there—her plea that her broom was worn thin was unacceptable."*(*A Fine Balance*, 118) Rohinton Mistry through his novel which resonates like a legitimate proof of the dreadful estate of the "*Chamaar Community*" shifts voice and visibility to minor characters like Dukhi Mochi whose livelihood depends on the death of a cow or buffalo in the village, their job being to remove the carcass, which is sometimes given free or paid for "*depending on whether or not the animal's upper-caste owner had been able to extract enough free labour from the Chamaars during the year,*" is physically humiliated and mentally tortured by upper-caste people and suffers from the psychological trauma. It not only focuses on the mishap and sarcasm of Dalit community but illustrates how they are being huffed, oppressed, manipulated, disrespected and tyrannised in the name of so-called traditional customs. For instance, when Narayan and Ishwar entered and touched the schoolhouse area, out of rage the school master caught both of them by their ears and dragged them outside: *"You Chamaar rascals! Very brave you are getting, daring to enter the school!"* (*A Fine Balance*, 110) The schoolmaster was not satisfied and he asked for the cane to teach a lesson to both of the chamaar boys: *"Get the cane from the cupboard," he ordered a girl. "And you two remove your pants. After I am through, not one of you achhoot boys will ever dream of fooling with things you are not supposed to touch."*(*A Fine Balance*, 111) Anew Dukhi found his incapability at inestimable when his both son was tormented and penalised by the upper caste person: *"How much he slapped my sons—you should see their swollen faces, Panditji,"* said Dukhi. *"And their backsides look like an angry tiger raked them with his claws."*(*A Fine Balance*, 112) The Post-independence time was the era of new aspiration and diversity but not in the case of low-caste people. Mistry portrays how chamaars were compelled to live at the amplitude due to the tyranny of Brahmins and zamindars. Dukhi Mochi's decision to train his children in the occupation of tailoring is a sheer reflection of 'Sanskritization'. M.N.Srinivas describes Sanskritization as a cultural process of social mobility in the caste system, whereby a lower caste can move up in the caste ranking by imitating the ritual way of life of a higher caste. Srinivas has well said that 'Sanskritization' is one of the three main axes of power namely the ritual, the economic, and the political. Rohinton Mistry questions the conditions of Dalits in so-called independent India by depicting the vulnerable lives of low-caste people who were forbidden to use natural measures without the consent of high-caste people, illicit to get an education, and denied choosing the profession of upper caste. Dukhi Mochi's family was destroyed and burnt alive except for Ishvar and Omprakash who left the village. The exploitation of low-caste people leads to the consolidation and emergence of Dalits in Indian politics. In spite of his mother's interdiction, Narayan's voice against the false ballots in the election is symbolic of the uprising of the Dalits as a political and social force in the 1990s in India. But at the next election, however, When Narayan wants to stamp his own ballot paper and two others in the line join him, Thakur Dharamsi arrives on the scene with his men and took them to Thakur's farm, where they are tortured to death: *"When they began to stir, the ropes were transferred from their ankles to their necks, and the three were hanged. The bodies were displayed in the village square."* (*A Fine Balance*, 168) and in the evening, Dukhi and his family are burnt alive in their hut. Only Ishvar and Omprakash escape the charges as they are away in town with Ashraf Chacha.

Struggling Woman, Dina:

Dina Dalal's journey in the novel celebrates the *"inclusiveness of life and the indestructibility of the human spirit"* (Kapadia, 176). The way Dina is treated by her elder brother, Nusswan after her father's death depicts the patriarchal mindset of Indian society that teaches girls to do household work since their childhood. Education and independence are out of reach for girls belonging to lower-middle-class families. Readers can see that Nusswan was always abusive to Dina and even forced her to drop out of school so that she could learn all the household chores like cooking, cleaning, and dusting. Dina was not afraid of her brother but always rebelled against him. She finally took a stand for herself by marrying a chemist Rustom Dalal whom she met at a concert hall, going against the wishes of her brother. Life was also ready to examine her willpower by making her a widow at such a tender age. Dina did not give up and decided to become a tailor and started working for a company named Au Revoir Exports to live her life independently without being a burden on her brother. Dina's tenacity is praiseworthy. She also supports Om and Ishvar who were migrants in the city of Bombay. Dina not only gave them employment when they smuggled their way out of the work camp by coming under the patronage of Beggarmaster but also allowed them to stay in her flat. She helped these two poor people amidst several misfortunes. All three were working as tailors quite smoothly for one year but then, the readers encountered the

effects of the Internal Emergency on Dina's tailoring business. The shanty town where the tailors resided was knocked down in a government "beautification" program and consequently, residents were forced to move into the streets. Dina sustained her living for some days in her flat till her landlord forced her to renounce the flat by increasing the rent which she could not afford and on the plea that she was violating the terms of the Rent Act and she was not supposed to run a business from her flat. She did not give up but the condition of the National Emergency and the murder of Beggar-master compelled her to succumb to her brother's pressure to stay with him. Her helpless situation forced her to go back to her brother. The story of this indomitable widow gives us a peep into a typical Indian society that has always been gender-biased. Coming back to the vulnerable condition of low-caste migrants in a big city like Bombay is awful. Om and Ishvar are left with no source of livelihood and they are brought to the streets where they were rounded up by a police beggar raid and sold to a labour camp. Readers witness the horrific lives of poor people like Ishvar and Om who migrated from their village to the city in search of a livelihood. In the narrative of the forced family planning camp during the time of the National Emergency, the novel describes the forced sterilisation of Ishvar who ends up becoming disabled, and the others were castrated because of the atrocities unleashed by the authoritarian rule. They cannot go back to their village because Thakur Dharamsi had burnt their home and family to take his revenge on them. After all, Om has once spitted on him and Om's uncle Narayan has raised his voice against this upper-caste man, a shrewd politician who indulged in corrupt electoral practice and cheated the illiterate low-caste people during the time of election. In a nutshell, Rohinton Mistry creates a spectre-like situation through his narratives. According to Luven, "*A Fine Balance is not just a family drama; it recounts the significant historical events of 20th-century India from the viewpoints of the Parsi as well as the Hindu Chammar community. Therefore, just as Such a Long Journey, A Fine Balance shows history from the periphery.*" (Luven, 33) Luven eloquently argued that *A Fine Balance* is most likely not a family story but rather a portrayal of historical events that took place in India, notably those that were chronicled in the 20th century, from the perspectives of the Parsi and Hindu Chammar communities. The majority of Mistry's novels are set against the backdrop of India's Independence, the Indian Emergency, and its effects on the populace. Mistry focused on two historically significant events that took place in India, specifically India's Independence (1947) and the time of the Indian Emergency (1975–1977). According to Rothermun, "*India is divided into two different nation states in the aftermath of 1947, following Jinnah's contention that India already consisted of "two nations," i.e. Hindus and Muslims.*" (Rothermun, 114). Pakistan, a new nation state created as a result of India's independence, provides a home for the Muslim community, whilst India's popular nation-state is the Hindu one. *A Fine Balance* shed some insight on some of the aspects of the conflict that should have arisen between India and Pakistan over the border that resulted in political diversion.

II. Conclusion:

As the typical Dalit literature, *A Fine Balance* showcases the Dalit psyche, Dalit The Journey of Indian Languages: Perspective on Culture and Society struggles and resistance in form of remonstrations to change their social "liberty" from "marginalise" to "autonomy", the cruel customs to follow foisted on them (Dalit) by the upper caste people. There is no denying the fact that India is developing in terms of technology, science, and commerce, but Mistry addresses some of the serious problems of corruption and nepotism in politics, and casteism in Indian society which are actual hindrances to the progress of India. Poverty is one of the poignant realities of twenty-first century India which is also raised by Mistry in his fiction because only a few sections of our society get access to education and employment opportunities. Those who will read this thesis will understand Mistry's use of the technique of literary realism. How Mistry incorporates intricate details about the setting and employs major symbols in his fiction to narrate real-life experiences of fictional characters. Social and psychological realism are devices employed by this prolific storyteller to create his fiction based on facts. Readers will be able to revisit some major historical events of post-independence India to understand how certain laws imposed by the government and authorities have the potential to brutally torture the common masses. *A Fine Balance* records the repercussions of grim political disturbances in post-independence India. Mistry presents the story of heroic struggles and hideous misfortunes that is based on physical, psychological, and social sufferings. He uses storytelling as a tool to revisit the political turmoil of post-independence India. Rohinton Mistry's writing prowess is reflected in his craft of linking and juxtaposing narratives of different characters from diverse backgrounds to make a fictional whole portraying verisimilitude of a given social and cultural space. The novelist provides a periscopic view of the new nation-state undergoing transition after independence. Henry James, one of the leading critics in contemporary critical theories of Narrative arts says, "*All life belongs to you, and don't listen either to those who would shut you up into corners of it and tell you that it is only here and there that art inhabits or to those who would persuade you that this heavenly messenger wings her way outside of life altogether, breathing a superfine air and turning away her head from the truth of things.*" (James, 84). James in his critical essay, *Art of Fiction* talks about the author's privilege of having limitless subjects for writing a novel. The author as an artist must realise his freedom of expression and should not take a back seat for the fear of criticism: "*The art of fiction cannot be disowned or cannot be trained or taught. James suggests as a broad definition of the genre that the*

novel is “a personal, direct impression of life, and it reveals a particular and unique mind.” (James, 167). Rohinton Mistry has been criticised for his false portrayal of Indian historical events and also his novel, *Such a Long Journey* was pulled down from the syllabus of the Mumbai University, but he does not take a back seat but rather assumes his responsibility to speak aloud about his community’s insecurities and give a voice to the larger voiceless section of Indian society.

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Declaration:

We declare that this is our original work and this work has not been sent anywhere for the consideration of publication.