
Treatment of Indian Diaspora in Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance*

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ABSTRACT

The Parsi writers of the Indian diaspora have enriched the Indian literature as well as world literature through their literary contributions. They aimed to present Parsis' psyche through the presentation of historical legends, the cadences of mythology, the problems arising out of migration, family conflicts, the east-west encounter, and the cultural diversity. A sense of displacement, search for balance, cultural assimilation and the complexities of new civilization which lead them to nostalgia, are the other major points of discussion to Parsi writers. Parsi fiction in English also gives voice to the works of members of the Indian diasporic writers, such as Rohinton Mistry and others. These writers have discussed and explored the various experiences of displacement on the base of socio-cultural pattern of their community. They look at them on the margins of the two cultures. The concept of cultural identity played a critical role in all the post-colonial struggles which have so profoundly reshaped world. It reflects the common historical experiences and every country has a distinct culture. Cultural diversity adds colour and variety to the human world but at the same time it divides people into numerous groups and thus proves a great barrier to human relationships.

Rohinton Mistry, a Parsi Gujarati of Indian origin, who migrated to Canada at the age of twenty-three but returns to India for themes and subject matter in all his works, embodies the displaced subject of postmodernity. Mistry's life and writing not only challenge all attempts to categorize but also highlight the futility of categories. The multiple spaces he inhabits - Parsi, Indian, and Canadian - raise important questions about belonging, identity, ethnicity, migrancy, diaspora, nation and multiculturalism that have been central to the various 'posts' - poststructuralism, postmodernism, and postcolonialism. If mass migration within the West was the defining feature of modernity, large scale migrations from the East to the West, not only of elite but also of subaltern cosmopolitans define the postmodern era. Unlike the forced migrations of the past that were compelled by natural, economic or religious reasons, migrations in the present, particularly of intellectuals and professionals are largely voluntary. With the destabilization of the fixities of space, place and nation in postmodernity, migrancy, viewed earlier as a condition of loss of home and exile, has come to be a privileged position and the migrant, the quintessential outsider, credited with a double vision.

The anguish of migrant writing often arises not from what it includes but from that which it excludes or is excluded from. In immigration or exile the essence of individual identity is dislocated from its human centres and is placed in a cultural context where the context itself assumes a disproportionately larger significance than the particular texts situated within it. It thus becomes possible to view the trauma of migrancy as a quintessentially modern dilemma of the anxiety of self-definition. In the context of such regimentation often migrant narratives are narratives in which there are more utterances

repressed or suppressed than expressed. One can witness in Mistry's writing a profound sense of this migrant sublime, a writing informed by the double vision acquired partially through his Canadian sojourn but also from his particular location in the Indian nation.

However, Mistry himself came to recognize the advantages of the double vision through an acute awareness of his outsider status. Having identified with Western culture as a Westernized Indian, his arrival in Canada made him sharply aware of his outsider status. One finds in Mistry a sharp and poignant consciousness of language and history. Mistry too treats history as a discourse that is suspect, which needs to be interrogated, interpreted and problematized as any other narrative discourse. For him history is the medium through which the writer has to journey in order to retrieve individual memories, memories that are as overlapping and anguishing as histories themselves. It is the migrant desire for identity that fuels the needs for this traversal of history, eschewing destination. Mistry's writing thus becomes a subversive attempt from the margins to expose the ideological underpinnings inherent in the selection, codification and presentation of events as official history. As the immutable objective truth that history claims to be is transformed into mutable subjective fiction by Mistry, one sees how reevaluation and re-deployment of past events are in fact postcolonial strategies to foreground other histories.

In fact, Mistry's work, *A Fine Balance* is remarkable for its sustained readability and clarity. The design of the story is quite simple. Within its 614 pages lies an account of social and historical development of a country. With an unnamed city (Mumbai) 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.' In the tiny flat of Dina Dalal, Ishvar and Omprakash Darji and Maneck Kohlah are painfully constructing new lives which become entwined in circumstances no one could have foreseen. Mistry prefers to deal with 'adyatanbhoot' (recent past) which is a seminal and phenomenal departure from the tradition. *A Fine Balance* gives popular versions of the real events. The physical distance from his motherland gives Mistry a better position to review it.

Mistry has an ability to make his characters articulate his own thoughts or popular versions of the fact. Mistry is sceptical about the declaration of emergency, it is very natural for him to centralize the exclusions of the historiographers. The chronology of the narration makes it obvious. The novel opens with a chapter titled 'Prologue 1975' and ends with 'Epilogue 1984' after the assassination of the Prime Minister. Even the partition of the subcontinent seems remote, only occasional references are made about it. Mistry normally depicts more than one version of the event/fact he is referring to. For the common people the Emergency is nothing but 'one more government tamasha' (*A Fine Balance* 5): "No consideration for people like us. Murders, suicide, Naxalite-terrorist killing, police custody, death-everything ends up delaying the trains." (*A Fine Balance* 6) For Dina it is "government problems-games played by people in power. It does not affect ordinary people like us." (*A Fine Balance* 75) However she is proved wrong as it did affect the ordinary people in more than one way. The upper-class people are fascinated by the Emergency. For them it is a magic wand, capable of curing all diseases and decay. The students were euphoric too for a different reason. They felt that by following Jaya Prakash Narayan, they could bring in a change which would "invigorate all society, transform it from a corrupt, moribund creature into a healthy organism." (*A Fine Balance* 243) The novel serves as a window to 'human possibility' with particular reference to a 'microscopic' community. It offers a kaleidoscopic view of the emergency. Mistry deals with excesses of emergency at length.

The People like Sergeant Kesar and Thakur Dharmasi had a free hand which soon disenchanted people from 'hi-fi' promises of the government. The beautification drives deprived people of their homes and the forced sterilization camps deprived youth like Om of their dreams. The officers-in-charge of various projects manipulated the figures to their advantage. People were reduced to a community: "Late in the day the truck arrived at an irrigating project where the facilitator unloaded the ninety-six individuals. The project manager counted them before signing the delivery receipt." (*A Fine Balance* 331) To add to the woes, the constitution and relevant laws were amended or modified to suit the purpose of the people at the centre. "What are we to say, madam," laments Mr. Valmik, "what are we to think about the state of this nation? When the highest court in the land turns the Prime Minister's guilt into innocence." (*A Fine Balance* 562) The assassination of the Prime Minister worsens the situation. A taxi-driver advises Maneck to shave off his beard. Homicide and arson paralyzed the city-life. The taxi-driver believes that the Prime Minister deserved her fate, "she gave her blessings to the guns and bombs, and then these wicked, violent instruments began hitting her own government . . . all her chickens came home for roasting." (*A Fine Balance* 582)

Rohinton Mistry's novel *A Fine Balance* spans a period of about 40 years of free India. The design of the story is quite simple. Between its opening chapter, 'Prologue: 1975' and the concluding one, 'Epilogue: 1995', its 614 pages reveal social as well as historical developments of a country. Though the name of the city in which the novel is set is mentioned nowhere, the readers have neither difficulty nor doubt in identifying the 'city by the sea' as Mumbai. With the city at the centre, Mistry weaves a subtle and compelling narrative about four unlikely characters that 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.'

In the tiny flat of Dina Dalal, a beautiful widow in her forties, Ishwar and Om Prakash Darji and Maneck Kohlah, a young student are painfully constructing new lives, which become entwined in circumstances no one could have foreseen. At first Dina and her tailor, Om are apprehensive about each other's concerns. Om tries to spy on Dina in order to find out the export company so that he can directly contact them and get orders. As the novel advances, circumstances conspire to deny them their modest aspirations. They all discover that there are other forces at play larger than their individual self. Each faces irrevocable damages. However, despite Maneck's disappointments and death, the concluding pages confirm the author's faith in life.

Mistry's metaphorical unfinished quilt is the central message of the story. Dina collects the little pieces of clothes to make quilt. The other three join in at a later stage. Every little piece of cloth is linked with memory of some or the other event. Like her quilt, the tailor's chronicle gradually gathers shape. Ishwar, for whom 'regret is luxury' which "he could not afford enjoys locating the oldest piece of fabric, moving chronologically, patch by patch, reconstructing the chain of their mishaps and triumphs, till they reached the uncompleted corner." (*A Fine Balance* 385) Like the fabric piece of the quilt, Mistry has narrated and re-narrated stories of country, culture and communities around a certain point of time and space. Meenakshi Mukherjee believes that all narratives are to be read in the context of specific time and place. But to her, "...while the narratives emerge out of a culture, they also contribute towards the construction of definition of this culture. Stories and communities are thus bound together in a symbiotic relationship." (*A Fine Balance* 155) To her this ability to create community is not only "an attribute of the epic and the oral tale, but in a less concrete and more ambivalent way one of the major powers of the

narrative fiction today" (*A Fine Balance* 155).

Mistry's work characteristically exposes a contradiction or cluster of tensions embedded within the culture itself as the result of an inter play between promises and commitments of the past and reality of the present. Significantly, the successive generations of the writers have exhibited keen interest in the recent past than the remote past, which is a seminal and phenomenal departure from the tradition. In Mistry's work, cultural patterns find internalization and adaptation within the stories of the individuals. In this sense, *A Fine Balance* offers a synthesis of culture and history. The author's own sensitivity, to history has compelled him to portray the major intellectual, cultural or political problems of his time. History gets into the novel rather unobtrusively, meandering between different social and cultural consciousness. The novel *A Fine Balance*, deals with the Emergency in their own way. But in his later work, Mistry's 'insider- outsider' status enables the readers to view the situation from different angles and has added a political-historical dimension to the novel. Mistry, as Homi Bhabha would put it, "represent(s) the cutting edge between the totalizing powers of the social and the forces that signify the more specific address to contentious, unequal interests and identities within the population." (*Nation and Narration* 279) In *A Fine Balance*, the characters articulate the author's concerns more vocally. Mistry is sceptical about the declaration of the emergency and centralizes the exclusions of the historiographers. The chronology of the narration makes it obvious. Even, the partition of the subcontinent seems remote, only occasional references are made about it. The author is more concerned with "murder, suicide, Naxalite-terrorist killing, police-custody death. . ." (*A Fine Balance* 6).

Mistry attempts to give a voice to marginalized sections and raises relevant questions. The fictitious accounts of the predicament of the protagonists can be true. What happened to Maneck Kohlah, Om or Ishvar could happen to any Indian. A whole arena of marginalized groups- the Parsis, the chamaars, the Muslims, the madari community, the beggars -share the same novelistic space and produce history by establishing a community or group identity. For them, as one of the characters in the novel utters, "nothing changes. Years pass, and nothing changes" (*A Fine Balance* 142). Mistry, by picking up a cue from Benedict Anderson, who asserts, "regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail . . . the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship;" (*Imagined Communities* 7) tries to problematize the totalizing concept of nation as well as history and presents subversive accounts to highlight cultural differences. He steers his narrative in desired direction by presenting more than one versions of the same event. For instance, for a common man the Emergency is nothing but "one more government tamasha;" (*A Fine Balance* 5) "No consideration for people like us. Murder, Suicide... everything ends up delaying the trains." (*A Fine Balance* 9) Those holding some influential post are happy, as "with the Emergency, everything is upside-down. Black can be made white, day turned into night. With the right influence and a little cash, sending people to jail is very easy. There's even a new law called MISA to simplify the whole procedure." (*A Fine Balance* 299) For Dina, it is only "government problems - games played by people in power. It does not affect ordinary people like us" (*A Fine Balance* 75).

However she is proved wrong as it did affect the ordinary people in more than one way. The upper-class people were fascinated by the Emergency. For them, it is a magic wand, capable of curing all diseases and decay. Mrs Gupta is in favour of it: "the Prime Minister's declaration yesterday of internal Emergency had incarcerated most of the parliamentary opposition, along with thousands of trade unionists, students and social workers." (*A Fine Balance* 373) Dina's arguments that the court found her (Indira) guilty of

cheating in the election does not recede her enthusiasm. "No, no, no!" She exclaims, "That is all rubbish, it will be appealed. Now all those troublemakers who accused her falsely have been put in jail. No more strikes and morchas and silly disturbances" (*A Fine Balance* 73). The students are euphoric too, for a different reason. They felt that by following Jaya Prakash Narayan, they could bring radical reforms and would "invigorate all of society, transform it from a corrupt, moribund creature into a healthy organism that would, with its heritage of a rich and ancient civilization, and the wisdom of the Vedas and Upanishads, awaken the world and lead the way towards enlightenment for all humanity" (*A Fine Balance* 243).

But students, like Avinash, are aware of the other side of the coin; he educates Maneck: Three weeks ago the High Court found the Prime Minister guilty of cheating in the last elections. Which meant she had to step down. But she began stalling. So the opposite parties, student organizations, trade unions- they started mass demonstrations across the country's. All calling for her resignation. Then, to hold on to power, she claimed that the country's security was threatened by internal disturbances, and declared a State of Emergency (*A Fine Balance* 245). And again, "under the pretext of Emergency, fundamental rights have been suspended, most of the opposition is under arrest, union leaders are in jail, and even some student leaders" (*A Fine Balance* 245).

Mistry, under the pretext of beautification, rampaged the slums, 'tearing into the structures of plywood, corrugated metal, and plastic' (*A Fine Balance* 295). The machines transformed 'the familiar field with its carefully ordered community into an alien place' (*A Fine Balance* 296). The beautification drives deprived people of their homes and the forced sterilization camps deprived youth like Om of their dreams. The officers-in-charge of various projects manipulated the figures to their advantage. People were reduced to a commodity, "Late in the day the truck arrived at an irrigating project where the Facilitator unloaded the ninety-six individuals. The project manager counted them before signing the delivery receipt" (*A Fine Balance* 331). The party workers were busy, arranging the Prime Minister's meetings, trying to gather a huge crowd for it, "there will be a payment of five rupees for each person. Also free tea and snack. Please line up outside at seven-thirty. Buses will leave at eight" (*A Fine Balance* 258). To add to the woes, the constitution and relevant laws were amended or modified to suit the purpose of the people at the centre. "What are we to say, madam?" laments Mr. Valmik, "What are we to think about the state of this nation? When the highest court in the land turns the Prime Minister's guilt into innocence" (*A Fine Balance* 562).

All the three protagonists are under constant threat of oppression. Various overlapping episodes display the author's sympathy for the subdued and his rancour against the oppressive authority. The seemingly separate stories of Maneck, Dina and the tailor-duo enable the author to narrate inter-actions between different class backgrounds. Dina's struggle and endurance represent a woman's plight in the society. Though Maneck and Dina are Parsis, the community does not occupy the centre, like the preceding work of Mistry. Nusswan exemplifies both, a male dominance and a false pride of the community. "Do you know how fortunate you are in our community?" He snaps, "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 onto your husband's funeral pyre, be roasted with him" (*A Fine Balance* 52).

Ishvar and Om belong to the *chamaar* caste. The narrative presents a documentary on the *chamaar*'s ways of life. Trivial details like how they skin the carcass, eat meat and tan the hide are dealt with great interest, and touching subtlety. For instance,

“And as he mastered the skills... Dukhi's own skin became impregnated with the odour that was part of his father's smell.”(*A Fine Balance* 98)

A Fine Balance attempts to achieve balance between the personal and the general. The text ventures to locate the lives of its characters in a historical context by juxtaposing the personal in relation to the general. Unlike Rushdie, who makes his protagonists live through history, Mistry's protagonists have little control over circumstances; in other words history happens to them. For instance, the Hindu-Muslim riot, on the eve of India's Independence, drags Ishvar and Narayan into confrontation with a crowd while they try to protect Ashraf's family. Om and Ishvar are taken to a labour- camp site at a later stage and again, Om is an unfortunate victim of forced sterilization drive. In that sense, Mistry is nearer to Mulk Raj Anand and Dickens than to his contemporaries holding magic wand of magic realism. His realistic mode of portraying brings to the fore the sordid living conditions of the lower caste people in rural India. The author juxtaposes the metropolis with an unknown 'village by a river.'

On the other hand, the quiet of the mountains is disturbed by the advent of multinational companies, posing a serious problem for the indigenes of the mountain-dwellers, affecting their lives adversely. Farukh Kohlah's soft-drink business suffers a heavy set back because of a modernized plant, leading him to reveries. Under the auspices of 'development' drives the ecological denudation of the Himalayas and the death of native enterprises are suggested: "But the day soon came when the mountains began to leave them. It started with roads, Engineers... promised roads that would hum with the swift passage of modern traffic Roads, wide and heavy-duty to replace scenic mountain paths too narrow for the broad vision of nation builders and World Bank Officials" (*A Fine Balance* 215).

No doubt, besides narrating the living experience, the writer has depicted concerns for neglected regions of this vast country. It is quite significant as India still lives in villages. Mistry's narrative meanders through simplicity of rural life and complexities of city life. The shift is remarkably towards more urban and modern situation. In this sense he is rediscovering his roots and is trying to understand Indian reality in terms of his past experience and tradition.

Mistry creates kaleidoscopic image of modern India by portraying individual prototypes. Dukhi, Roopa, Radha, Narayan, Ashraf, Ishvar, Om represent the world of subalterns. His characters are both oppressors and oppressed. For instance, when a Bhangi ventured towards the hut of Narayan, Rupa, though she herself a Chamaar, rebukes him, using the same language as her upper cast oppressors; “Where do you think you are going? I bathe your filthy skin with the boiling water.” (*A Fine Balance* 133) She chides her son, “We are not going to deal with such low-caste people! How can you even think of measuring someone who carts the shit from people's houses” (*A Fine Balance* 133)?

The concluding pages of *A Fine Balance* bear a clear sign of its author's contempt. The taxi-driver voices its creator: "Same way all her problems started. With her own mischief making. Just like in Sri Lanka, Kashmir, Assam, and Tamil Nadu. In Punjab, she was helping one group to make trouble for state government... She gave her blessings to the guns and bombs, and then these wicked, violent Instruments began hitting her own government. How do you say in English — all her chickens come home for roasting, isn't it?" (*A Fine Balance* 582) The verbosity of the taxi-driver speaks for thousands of Indians' unspoken thoughts, “Arey, it's the work of criminal gangs paid by her party. Some ministers are even helping the gangs, providing official lists of Sikh homes and businesses. Otherwise, it's not possible for the killers to work so efficiently, so accurately, in such a big

city.” (*A Fine Balance* 582)

Mistry's version of history has different dimensions. He focuses on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of 'cultural differences.' “The prime aim of the literature,” according to A. K. Singh, “is to initiate dialogue where it does not exist, particularly between the people and the communities that share certain geo-socio-eco-political and cultural space.” (*The Muse and the Minority* 109) Parsis in *A Fine Balance* offer social articulation of difference from the minority perspective, delineating a world of underprivileged classes with their aspirations and assertions. Mistry's novels gain their effective strength from interplay of fact and fiction. He presents histories from a writer's point of view that tries to dis/uncover the suppressed or neglected chapters of Indian history. By re-narration of history, the novelist constructs his story of his community and nation.

A Fine Balance has tried to balance the caste divide with cooperation and friendship between the lower caste Hindus and working class Muslims. However, there is nothing of the ideological in such a configuration and the relationship between the families of Dukhi Mochi and Ashraf Tailor in that sense exists in a universalist/humanist landscape, though in the context of first the independence of India and then the Emergency. The opportunity to comment on the irony inherent in the rampaging Hindu mobs during the independence of India, claiming the lower caste Om and Ishvar, as the self, while othering the Muslims, has not been utilized by Mistry.

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