

Culture and Parsi Life in Rohinton Mistry's a Fine Balance

Dr. Indira S. Patil (Research Guide)^{1*} Mr. Devidas Adhar Pardhi (Research Scholar)²

¹JDMVP'S Arts, Commerce & Science College, Jalgaon, Maharashtra

²Assistant Professor, M.D Sisode Art & Commerce College, Nardana Tal- Sinkheda Distt. Dhule

Abstract – Rohinton Mistry's novels reflect interest in the importance of personal and cultural identity. It is obvious that Mistry has well depicted his deep attachment and nostalgia for his homeland. The social and cultural nostalgia helped him to create a sense of loss. He recognizes the consequence of religion and rite in the construction of human identity. Rohinton Mistry is an expatriate Indian-Parsi writer who lives in Canada. As a Parsi and also a immigrant in Canada, he look at him as a symbol of double displacement and this sense of displacement is a recurrent theme in his literary works. His historical situation includes development of new identity in the nation to which he has migrated and a complex relationship with political and cultural history of the nation he has left behind.

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INTRODUCTION

A Fine Balance is the second novel by Rohinton Mistry. Set in "an unidentified city" in India, initially in 1975 and later in 1984 during the turmoil of The Emergency. The book concerns four characters from varied backgrounds – Dina Dalal, Ishvar Darji, his nephew Omprakash Darji and the young student Maneck Kohlah – who come together and develop a bond.

First published by McClelland and Stewart in 1995, it won the 1995 Giller Prize. It was shortlisted for the Booker Prize in 1996. It was one of the only two Canadian books selected for Oprah's Book Club, and was one of the selected books in the 2002 edition of *Canada Reads*, championed by actress Megan Follows.

The book exposes the changes in Indian society from independence in 1947 to the Emergency called by Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. Mistry was generally critical of Gandhi in the book. Gandhi, however, is never referred to by name by any of the characters, and is instead called simply "the Prime Minister". The characters, from diverse backgrounds, are brought together by economic forces changing India.

Prologue; Ishvar and Om's story

Ishvar and Omprakash's family is part of the Chamaar caste, who traditionally cured leather and were considered untouchable. In an attempt to break away from the restrictive caste system, Ishvar's father

apprentices his sons Ishvar and Narayan to a Muslim tailor, Ashraf Chacha, in a nearby town, and so they became tailors. As a result of their skills, which are also passed on to Narayan's son Omprakash (Om), Ishvar and Om move to Bombay to get work, by then unavailable in the town near their village because a pre-made clothing shop has opened.

A powerful upper-caste village thug, Thakur Dharamsi, later has his henchmen murder Narayan and his family for having the temerity to ask for a ballot. Ishvar and Omprakash are the only two who escape the killing as they lodged with Ashraf in the nearby town.

At the beginning of the book, the two tailors, Ishvar and Omprakash, are on their way to the flat of widow Dina Dalal via a train. While on the train, they meet a college student named Maneck Kohlah, who coincidentally is also on his way to the flat of Dina Dalal to be a boarder. Maneck, from a small mountain village in northern India, moves to the city to acquire a college certificate "as a back-up" in case his father's soft drink business is no longer able to compete after the building of a highway near their village. Maneck and the two tailors become friends and go to Dina's flat together. Dina hires Ishvar and Om for piecework, and is happy to let Maneck stay with her.

Dina, from a traditionally wealthy Parsi family, maintains tenuous independence from her brother by living in the flat of her deceased husband, who was a chemist.

Dina's Story

Dina grew up in a wealthy family. Her father was a medical doctor who died when she was twelve. Her mother was withdrawn and unable to take care of Dina after her father's death, so the job fell to Nusswan, Dina's elder brother. Nusswan was rather abusive to Dina, forcing her to do all the cooking, cleaning, and drop out of school, and hitting her when she went against his wishes. Dina rebelled against Nusswan and his prospective suitors for her when she came of age, and found her own husband, Rustom Dalal, a chemist, at a concert hall. Nusswan and his wife Ruby were happy to let her marry Rustom and move to his flat.

Dina and Rustom lived happily for three years until Rustom died on their third wedding anniversary, after being hit by a car while on his bicycle. Dina became a tailor under the guidance of Rustom's surrogate parents to avoid having to move in with Nusswan. After twenty years her eyesight gave out from complicated embroidery and she was once again jobless. She eventually met a lady from a company called Au Revoir Exports - Mrs Gupta - who would buy ready-made dresses in patterns. She agrees to let Dina sew the patterns. But since Dina has very poor eyesight, she decides to hire tailors. She also decides to have a paying guest to generate more income for her rent.

The tailors rent their own sewing machines, and come to Dina's flat each day for nearly two weeks before the first round of dresses is completed. The three get along fairly well, but Dina and Omprakash do not see eye to eye all the time. Omprakash is angry that Dina is a middle-person; he wants to sew for Au Revoir directly.

Maneck's story

Maneck was born in a mountain town to loving parents, Mr and Mrs Kohlah. His father owned a grocery store that had been in the family for generations. The store sold household necessities and manufactured the locally popular soda, Kohlah Cola. Maneck spent his days going to school, helping at the store, and going on walks with his father. When he was in the fourth standard, Maneck was sent to boarding school to help his education, much to his dismay. After this, his relationship with his parents deteriorates because he does not wish to be separated from them and feels betrayed. His parents send him to a college and choose his major, refrigeration and air-conditioning.

Maneck goes to college and stays at the student hostel. Maneck becomes friends with his neighbor, Avinash, who is also the student president and who teaches him how to get rid of vermin in his room. Avinash also teaches Maneck chess and they play together often. Avinash later becomes involved in

political events, for which Maneck has little interest, and their friendship is no longer a priority for Avinash. They start seeing each other quite infrequently. But when the Emergency is declared in India, political activists had to go into hiding in order to be safe, Avinash included. Maneck, after a humiliating ragging session by fellow hostel students, has his mother arrange a different living situation for him, and he moves in with Dina Dalal.

Effects of the Emergency

Dina and the tailors' business runs fairly smoothly for almost a year, but effects of the Emergency bother them often. The shantytown where the tailors live is knocked down in a government "beautification" program, and the residents are uncompensated and forced to move into the streets. Later Ishvar and Om are rounded up by a police beggar raid and are sold to a labor camp. After two months in the camp, they bribe their way out with the help of the Beggarmaster, a kind of pimp for beggars. Ishvar and Om are lucky and Dina decides to let them stay with her. The tailors and Dina find trouble from the landlord, because she is not supposed to be running a business from her flat. She pretends that Ishvar is her husband and Om their son and also gets protection from the Beggarmaster.

Epilogue: 1984

Eight years later, Maneck returns home for the second time from Dubai for his father's funeral. Maneck is repulsed by the violence that follows after the Prime Minister's assassination, for which Sikhs are killed. He returns home and attends the funeral, but cannot bring himself to truly miss his father, only the father of his young childhood.

While at home he reads old newspapers and learns that Avinash's three sisters have hung themselves, unable to bear their parents' humiliation at not being able to provide dowries for their marriages. Shocked and shaken, he decides to visit Dina in Bombay for better news. He learns from Dina the horrific lives that Ishvar and Om – one disabled and the other castrated – have led as beggars after their village visit. As Maneck leaves, he encounters Om and Ishvar on the street. The two former tailors are nearly unrecognizable because of their filth, and don't appear to recall him. They say "Salaam" to him, but he doesn't know what to say and walks on.

Main Characters are from the Parsi Community

Rohinton Mistry shows the sufferings of poor characters from the Parsi community and atrocities of two untouchables from the village in *A Fine Balance*. He uses four main characters a woman and three men. Each of the four protagonists has own story. The four main characters converge in Dina's apartment as refugees from contracting caste,

gender, or social roles. They each live in an unimportant position in the context of India. They are transferred by the community and try to centre their own individuality. The apartment is viewed as the worldly site of individuals in a troublesome society. Their life in Bombay is contrary to their expectations and symbolizes the anguish, pain, anxiety and restlessness of people cut off from their native villages. The novel is about sufferings and pain of the poorest people. From this way, *A Fine Balance* is the story of the heroic struggles and hideous misfortunes that is based on physical, psychological and social sufferings.

CULUTUR E AND PARSİ LIFE

Such a Long Journey was the first major work of Rohinton Mistry, in which he explored in depth the various complex attributes of Parsi life, history, culture and character. Mistry set this novel at a sensitive point in contemporary Indian history, when the Nehruvian era had just ended after Nehru's sudden death, and soon gave way to degenerate politics of opportunism, nepotism and violence.

Further, during the period 1962-1972 India had to engage in three successive wars, with China, Pakistan, and for the liberation of Bangladesh. This period also saw the rise of communal politics in various parts of India, the emergence of new political alignments, the slow but sure politics of votes by the dominant Hindu or Brahmin community of India.

His second novel *A Fine Balance* is also an example of Indian Parsi writing. *A Fine Balance* is the novel which deals with the four main characters whose lives come to same end in the novel. Although they belong to different places of the India but their sufferings are the same. Mistry has set this novel in three different backgrounds. Dina Dalal lives in Bombay. The tailors, Ishwar and Om, represent rural India as they belong to a village. Other main character Maneck Kohlah is from the Himalayas (North India).

The Parsis also feel insecure because of the growing political power in Bombay. Thus Dinshawji says Gustad, "Wait till the Marathas take over, then we will have the real Gandoo Raj... All they know is to have rallies at Shivaji park, shout slogans, make threats and change road names" (75). Dilnavas has always doubt on the death of Feroze Gandhi as Nehru never liked him as his son-in-law Feroze Gandhi from the beginning. Thus Dinshawji agrees and says. "Even today people say Feroze's heart attack was not really a heart attack." (197). Thus all the members of their community feel insecure in India in *Such A Long Journey*.

Nagarwala incident makes clear that the Parsis do not like the involvement of any of their community members in any scandal which may defame their

community. The novel also focuses on the customs and rituals of Parsi community. Dinshawji tells Gustad about Indira Gandhi's Nationalization of Bank

What days those were, yaar. What fun we used to have ... Parsis were the kings of banking in those days. Such respect we used to get. Now the whole atmosphere only has been spoiled. Ever since that Indira nationalized the banks.

Nationalization of the banks was at that time inevitable in the larger interest of the downtrodden masses of India. Mrs. Indira Gandhi's decision would have displeased the Parsis who were the owners of private banks but she did not have any selfish motive in Nationalization of banks.

Mistry's most recent novel, *Family Matters* can be called a retreat into the Bombay Parsi world. About the novel *Family Matters*, Linda L. Richards remarks, "His most recent novel, *Family Matters* is brilliant. It manages to be warm and familiar, while- for North American readers, at any rate-fragantly exotic.

Rohinton Mistry has portrayed the life of a middle-class Parsi family of Bombay. The focus of the novel has shifted from the 1970s and the years of the emergency to the more recent times. The Shiv Sena is still around the novel. The time of the novel is the post Babri Masjid Bombay. Coomy points out the dangers lurking indoors and outdoors. She talks about the burning down of an old Parsi couple by rioting Hindu mobs, under the mistaken impression that fleeing Muslims had been given shelter in that building. She also points out that Bombay burnt for months after the razing of the mosque in Ayodhya. "How often does a mosque in Ayodhya turn people into savages in Bombay? Once in a blue moon." Coomy also says that the senior citizens of Bombay are experiencing danger and also killed for the money. Jal says, "Just last week in Firozsha Baag an old lady was beaten and robbed inside her own flat. Poor thing is barely clinging to life at Parsi general.

A Fine Balance is anchored in the Post-Independent India and more specifically in the days of Indira Gandhi's rule with Dina Dalal and other characters, who suffers a lot because of political disturbances around them. Most of the events in the novel revolve around a predicament of a layman. K.Ratna Shiela Mani observes:

Mistry narrates the story in a masterly fashion and the reader is shuffled between various time phases that mark each major historical upheaval. He highlights crucial events in the country's chronicle by depicting the background of each of the major characters. Ishwar and his nephew Om are from the village; Maneck is from a hill station in the north, while Dina lives in the metropolis. The lives of the tailor's forefathers reflect the tyranny of the caste system in rural India where

unimaginable horrors are perpetrated on the lower castes. Oppressive caste violence has driven Om Prakash and Ishvar from their traditional occupation of working with leather to learn the skills of tailoring in the town. However, dwindling avenues of work in the town bring them to the metropolis. Maneck comes to the city for higher education. In Maneck's background also lies the pathetic story of India's partition. Dina's story is one of struggle-struggle to safeguard her fragile independence from her autocratic brother Nussawan; and protect her flat from her rapacious landlord. Her story is symbolic of the rebellion of the young women against their subjection. Each member of this quartet aspires in changing society to transcend the constraints of birth, caste, sex in a modern, urban world where anything seems possible.

Thus in all the three novels Mistry has highlighted the India in its historical, political and cultural significance. Mistry has well studied the historical boundary of India and he has also brought them in his novels. Although his novels are showing India in its true sense but he has not forgotten his identity as Parsi. Like other Parsi writers, in his novels we can see that Parsi community emerges as a protagonist. He has presented his community through the narratives of his characters of the novels. In this regard V.L.V.N. Narendra Kumar writes as "the Parsees are attempting to assert their ethnic identity in diverse ways. Parsee novel in English reflects this assertion of Parsee identity."

PARSI MARGINALIZATION AND THE POLITICS OF DIASPORA

Holding this book in your hand, sinking back in your soft armchair, 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 a fiction. All is true (Honoré de Balzac's, *Le Père Goriot*).

The text is prefaced by a warning from Honoré de Balzac's, *Le Père Goriot*. The warning itself divides people from birth into those who have a future and those who have no future. The novel is an attempt to show the spirit of struggle for survival. It is important to note that our politicians for some trivial gains are distorting the image of secular India. R. Carroll has a point in this context of cultural assimilation and cultural exclusivity:

People can be 'different' in various social ways while still sharing the same culture. The rhetoric of distinctiveness has reminded, may change without the culture itself alter very much. In other words when an individual changes socially, the cultural premises (and the logic which gives order to the world) do not necessarily change. What is changed is the way of expressing the basic truth, not truth themselves (Carroll 145).

A Fine Balance (1995) is one of Mistry's the most imaginative and admirable work. Speaking to Paul Wilson, Mistry discussed the multiple sources and how the novel came into existence. It begins with a single impulse. He seems to be haunted by the image of a woman at a sewing machine. From there, he builds up the story of Dina, a widow who runs a small dress-making operation out of her flat on the edge of a sprawling urban Indian slum. To make ends meet, she takes in a student boarder, Maneck Kohlah and provides accommodation for two former "untouchables", Ishvar Darji and his nephew Omprakash, who work for her as tailors. The central action of the novel takes place in 1975, the year Indira Gandhi declared a state of emergency to save her political life. It keeps her in power for a few more years but it was a measure that brought unforeseen misery to millions of ordinary Indians, and of course one that touches the lives of Mistry's characters with brutal directness. Mistry feels that after Indo-Pak war in 1971 which is the political backdrop in *Such a Long Journey*, the next great event is the 1975 imposition of Emergency. Although, he did not experience it since he left India in the same year yet he, "wanted to tell the story through the eyes and the voices of the dispossessed, the ones at the very bottom" (Wilson 4). It is a 'conscious effort to embrace more of the social reality of India'. The narratives of the novel depict reality of the multi-ethnic groups in the society and their misfortunes and hardships seem exaggerated to those who do not have sensitivity to feel their pain and agony.

CONCLUSION

A Fine Balance is an absorbing and moving text about life of common, vulnerable people who scuttle about on this globe and whose lives are caught in the vicious cycle of poverty. The novel depicts the picture of the present-day India, shows the sufferings of the outcasts and innocents trying to survive in a cruel and hostile world and grapples with the question of how to live in the face of death and despair. The poor who are the main characters in this novel are also maimed, mutilated, poisoned, homeless and hopeless. He proposes a world in which nothing can really change or improve the condition of the poor and the deprived. The society is a place only for the rich, the corrupt, the oppressive and the unscrupulous. They keep growing luxuriantly. Mistry concludes the novel on the intriguing note that no matter how much the lower and deprived class struggles it will always find it difficult well nigh impossible to break the very shackles of poverty. It will be suppressed, driven into extreme survival struggle by the fraudulent and the malicious system.

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E-Mail – dpardhi100@gmail.com

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Corresponding Author

Dr. Indira S. Patil (Research Guide)*

JDMVP'S Arts, Commerce & Science College,
Jalgaon, Maharashtra