

THE IMPACT OF VIOLENCE AND THE HISTORY OF POST- INDEPENDENCE INDIA IN ROHINTON MISTRY'S *A FINE BALANCE*.

Mrs.A Vanitha Jaya Rani and Dr. R.Chakkaravarthy ,

Principal, Madonna Matriculation School, G.R Nagar, Kannanendal, Madurai, Tamilnadu.

Vive- Principal, Associate Professor of English, G.T.N Arts College, Dindigul, Tamilnadu.

Abstract: History has been the major preoccupation of the recent Indian novelists in English. There is a view that of our contemporary Indian English novelists are overburdened with history and the novels are so full of details from Indian history that end up sagging under its weight. Yet Mistry's novels do not suffer from such excess. Rohinton Mistry's novel *A Fine Balance*, published in 1977, is the story of how four characters- Dina Dalal, Om and Ishvar Dariji and Manek Kohlah, come together to live in the madness of Bombay. This can be labelled a historical novel as it presents some of the important events in the history of the post-independence India and the way these events in the history of the post-independence India and the way these affect the lives of the ordinary people. The novel focuses on two such events, the partition coupled with Indian independence in 1947 and the state of Emergency between 1975 and 1977.

Key words: Historical Events before and after independence, partition, struggle, the impact of violence.

A Fine Balance is the finest and most intense of Mistry's three novels where his concern for poor, the destitute and the powerless becomes a political statement. It is a novel where the middle class and the anonymous, faceless working meet, sympathise with each other and learn to overcome their prejudices and forge bonds on friendship, affection and humanity. It is Mistry's second novel set in an unnamed city that the reader can easily guess is Bombay. That year is 1975 when Mistry emigrated to Canada and the year that Indira Gandhi declared a state of emergency setting herself up as India's virtual dictator. The novel concentrates on the terror experienced by people during the emergency underlining the most unsightly and hideous aspects of life such as poverty, despair and violence.

India had been a British colony for many years a long struggle, the British officials decided to grant India independence, if the leaders could agree upon a form of a Government. The new congress party and the Muslim League did not agree and this resulted in the eruption of violence between Hindu officials then agreed on a solution: the partition of India into two separate nations – India and Pakistan. This decision forced the Sikhs and Hindus in Pakistan to move to India and Muslim in India to move to Pakistan. The impact of violence during this partition on the lives of ordinary people is vividly presented in this novel.

In 1947, the majority of Indian's rejoiced at the departure British Colonizers. However as history shows Indians proved unable to cope with immense responsibility of being their own rules. The Parsis who thrived during British colonization suffered immediately at the departure of the British colonizers and complained that they had departed in a hurry. If we consider the situation of Farakh Kohlah, Manack's father, a Parsi, we discover that it is not only nostalgia for times gone by but also a more pragmatic sadness over the departure of the colonizers as he had lost huge plot of land during the partition.

"A foreigner draw a magic line on a map and called it the new border, it became

A river of blood upon the earth. The orchards, fields, factories, business all

On the wrong side of that line vanished with a wave of the pale conjuror's wand" (205).

The violent conflicts between between Hindus and Muslim reach unimaginable proportions in certain regions.

"communal slaughter at the brand new border had ignited riots everywhere and sporting

A fez in a Hindu neighborhood was as fatal as possessing a foreskin in a Muslim one.

In a certain area it was wiser to go headed, for choosing incorrectly mong fez,

White cap, and turban could mean one's hand" (87)

A Fine Balance attempts to locate the lives of its characters in this historical context. In other words, the personal is seen in relation to the general. For instance, the Hindu-Muslim riots on the eve of India's independence is not described as a happening but is concretely realized in a touching incident where Ashraf Chacha's family is saved from the Hindu marauders by the guile and timely action of Ishvar and Om. They are witness to all this aggression while they learn the trade of tailoring in the house of Ashraf Chacha. They repay their kindness by saving them from an angry mob ready to slaughter and burn to the ground everything Muslim. And this leads to a greater human bonding between them. Many a time history gets into the novel rather unobtrusively as it does in the various references to the freedom struggle and Gandhi's message: the linguistic movements; Bombay; the instigation of RSS workers during and the Anti-Sikh riots in Delhi 1984.

After the death of Nehru in 1964 and Lal Bahadur Sastri in 1966, Indira Gandhi became the Prime Minister of India. She was appointed as the head of the ruling Congress party. Her party won a landslide victory in 1972 and her opponents in the opposition party alleged that she had committed electoral malpractice. In June 1975, the High Court ruled against her, which meant that she would lose her seat and stay out of politics for the President of India to announce the state of emergency on 25th June 1975. She imprisoned all her political foes, passed laws that limited personal freedom and placed the nation's press under strict censorship. When she felt certain that she had effectively quelled her political opposition, Gandhi finally called for open elections in 1977 in which she and her party were defeated. She left office but returned to parliament in 1978. She ruled as Prime Minister again from 1980 until her assassination in 1984.

In the early 1980's the Sikh extremists in Punjab demanded for autonomy and resorted to violence. Mrs. Gandhi responded to this by ordering an army attack on their holy shrine, the Golden Temple in Amritsar in June 1984 and more than four hundred and fifty Sikhs were killed in this attack. In November 1984, she was assassinated by her own Sikh bodyguards in her own garden. Besides the abusive measures during emergency, Mrs. Gandhi also increased the use of military force in the action and she fostered a culture of nepotism.

The second historical event, the state of Emergency, has an overwhelming presence in the novel and devastating consequences for the existences of many characters, Dina, though from an upper middle class family, too, feels the consequences of events; she is banned from leaving the house a fact which traps her within the confines of her brother's tyranny. Ishvar and Omprakash are probably the one who suffer the most. Om and Ishvar and all the slum dwellers are forcibly loaded onto buses and brought to a political rally to be addressed by the

the Prime Minister. The absolute alienation of the forced audience from the political discourse is made clear even before the rally.

Tell her how happy we are! Why do we need to come? Ask you men

With the cameras to pull some photos of our lovely houses, our healthy

Children! Show that to the Prime Minister (318-19).

It is the Emergency that gets represented most realistically in the novel since the fusion between the general and the personal is seen here at its best. Ishvar and Om manage to find a shack in the jhopadpatti that, incidentally, is most vividly portrayed by Mistry, something of a novelty in recent Indian English fiction. We have a memorable account of the inhabitants of the jhopadpatti being taken to a village to form part of the audience where the Prime Minister speaks to them of the numerous benefits of the emergency to the poor. Mistry terms this performance of hers, rather satirically, as "a day in the circus." The commentary of the hair collector, Rajaram- we have clowns, monkeys, acrobats, everything" (328) clearly illustrates the politicians' complete lack of relevance to the concerns of the slum dwellers and the unformulated criticism of the masquerade of fawning politicians, rehearsed hand-clapping and various gimmicks to get the audience to clap.

Though Ishvar and Om are not able to intellectually comprehend the factors that lead to the impositions of the emergency, they feel its repercussions purely at the personal level when their jhopadpatti is bulldozed as a part of the city beautification programme which has to be followed by the elimination of poverty. Rendered homeless, they end up as pavement dwellers, but even here there is no solace available to them. They are then taken away to a nearby irrigation project site where they go through the hard grind of manual labour, which being provided with the semblance of a shelter and offered some food. They are eventually rescued by the Beggarmaster and back in Dina Dalal's flat.

The final blow to their dignity takes place with the forceful implementation of yet another Government policy, sterilization as a mode of population control. Ishvar and Om go to their village to celebrate Om's marriage. Here again the age-old caste oppression and tyranny takes over when Om tries to act against the wish of Thakur Dharamsi. Ishvar and Om are forcibly taken to a family planning clinic and sterilized. Om, in fact, is castrated. Ishvar's legs were amputated because of the gangrene caused by the unsanitary operation he is forced to undergo and they are back once again in Bombay, but now as beggars. In the meanwhile, Manek returns from Dubai after eight years to attend his father's funeral and is shattered to learn of the mass suicide of Avinash's three sisters and Avinash himself having been earlier killed in police custody. He curses God and the final blow to Manek's sanity is that Ishvar and Om have become beggars. Though he sees them, he refuses to recognise them and kills himself walking into a moving train. The novel ends with the old Dina Dalal feeding Ishvar and Om without the knowledge of her brother Nusswan and his wife with whom she now stays.

We have in *A Fine Balance* a wonderfully successful account of the life of the country between 1945 and 1984 with the middle classes, the lower castes and the poor figuring prominently, an accomplishment quite unusual in Indian fiction in English. Rohinton Mistry has made it possible for the Indian novel in English to explore into areas of human experience which were hitherto only tangentially touched upon. Thus his novel rooted in the Indian reality helps us grapple with the multifarious problems confronting our society.

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