

INDIAN COMMUNAL SANITY IN THE CREATIVE WRITING OF ROHINTON MISTRY

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Abstract

In Mistry's *A Fine Balance*, an model of the superior thoughtful is given. It is a narrative that pervades the momentous events of India's history from the turbulent times of the country's partition in 1947, through the horrors of the Emergency in 1975, to the macabre aftermath of its Prime Minister's assassination in 1984. The story of the novel is built upon four characters whose predicaments intersect during the "State of Internal Emergency" declared by Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi. Mistry manipulates the story in a way that 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 protagonist. The lives of the tailors' forefathers reflect the tyranny of the caste system in rural India where unimaginable horrors are perpetrated on the lower castes. The reader is satisfyingly staggered to find a woman, Dina Dalal, nee Shroff, at the tiller of affairs, unlike Mistry's earlier works. She is introduced in the Prologue as a widow of Rustam Dalal. Two Tailors, Ishvar and Omprakash Darji and a young student, Maneck Kohlah reach her small, shabby flat together.

The tailors have come in search of work and Maneck for paying guest accommodation. The four main characters of the narrative are thus introduced in the 'Prologue: 1975', which ends on a note of optimism. The first chapter has Dina reminiscing about her past – childhood, youth and the life that has gone by. Her father was a doctor and in his lifetime Dina has a very sheltered and pampered childhood. Her woes begin with his sudden untimely death which leaves the twelve year old Dina hapless and without a pillar to lean on, especially with her mother becoming more and more reclusive and increasingly uncomprehending of things around her. Dina helps her in her daily chores and even takes leave from school to accompany her mother to the Fire Temple to offer prayers for her father. Nevertheless, the lewd behaviour of the priest, Dustoor Framji towards Dina [and all young girls] leaves a bitter taste in her mouth – so much so that she does not go to the fire temple of her own accord in her childhood or even on growing up. She is so completely disillusioned with his behaviour that for her marriage ceremony with Rustom, she prefers to stay clear of him. Dustoor Daab-Chaab, voices his grievances thus – "For death they come to me – for seros-mu-partare, for afargan, baaj, faroksry. But for a happy occasion, for wedding ashirvad, I am not wanted." (Avadhesh Kumar Singh: 1996: 45)

This is one of the few occasions in the narrative when Mistry indulges in high-lighting Parsi customs. Unfortunately, for Dina, Rustom dies on their third marriage anniversary. Her world comes crashing down, but she conducts herself in a very dignified manner, stays with her brother's family for some time, and later shifts to Rustom's flat to live independently, by herself. Rustom's relatives, Shirin Aunty and Darab Uncle help her in getting

some tailoring assignments. During these jobs, she comes in contact with some idiosyncratic members of the Parsi community. The Munshis were the best because they paid promptly. The Parekhs liked to haggle. Mr. Savukshaw spent a lot of his money on the bottle, so it was advisable to collect advance payment from them. The Surtees were a very ridiculous pair – Mrs. Surtee was in the habit of burning up all of Mr. Surtee's *pyjamas* whenever they had an argument and served him the ashes collected on a plate for dinner.

This process resulted in ordering many pairs of *pyjamas* at a time, but, Dina was advised to pretend noting was amiss. Other names taken are Davars, Kotwals, Mehtas, Pavris, Vatchas and Seervais. But they are only introduced in name on page 67 of the novel, with no direct meeting with Dina being put on record. An important bit of advice imparted to Dina by Shirin Aunty was not to measure the men for their inseams in isolation lest they take advantage of the situation. Dina's business meetings with a Parsi bachelor, Freedom, is described over the next few pages. These meetings, however, verge on relationship – Dina and Freedom become lovers. Here, however, Mistry takes the opportunity to highlight a Zoroastrian belief of the sanctity of marriage. "According to Zoroastrianism, a true marriage is the sacred union of two souls, competing with each other in the ideal practice of self-abnegation. The marriage – ritual is also symbolic; fire which is present at the agreement – stage, is taken as the witness to the union of the two souls". (Narendra Kumar V. L. V. N.: 2002 : 25)

Considering the principle of marriage in mind, Dina has certain reservations even though she taken Freedom as a lover. "But when they ventured into the private garden of intimacy, it was a troubled relationship. There were certain things she could not bring herself to do. The bed-any-bed-was out of bounds, sacred and reserved for married couples only". (73) There exists another Parsi belief highlighted by Mistry through the trials of Dina as a widow. It is the bad omen of getting hair cut within the premises of one's dwelling place. Dina was in touch with her school friend, Zenobia who had become successful as a hair stylist.

Zenobia taught Dina the basics of hair-cutting and advised her to visit the homes of relatives and friends to provide an easier hair-cut for their children within the comfort of their homes. This effort, however, provided futile, for people retaliated with: "Madam, you have no consideration? What have we done to you that you want to bring misfortune within our four walls?" (72) And again, "Some people did offer her their children's heads. But only if you do it outside; they said. Dina refused. There were limits to what she would do. She was a in home children's stylist, not an open – air pavement barber". (72) These incidents bring to mind an incident from Dina's childhood, when she had defied Nusswan and with the help of Zenobia had cut off her long plaits in school, in favour of a shorter hair style which was in fashion. Nusswan had retaliated in quite a similar manner. "I don't want another word from you Take a bath first you polluted creature! Wash off those hair clippings before you spread them around the house and bring misfortune upon us!" (28), At the time of death of Dr. Shroff, Nusswan was almost twice the age of his sister, Dina. He assumed the role of head of the family, sold off his father's dispensary and started controlling the family's finances. He decided to relieve the live-in-servant, Lilly, and by his wily ways made Dina do all the housework. This resulted in her poor performance at school. He decided to stop her studies. This ended in a bitter fight between them. Acts like these on Nusswan's part against the Zoroastrian tenets, which teach – "The true Zoroastrian way of life consists in spreading happiness around.... A true Parsee lives not for himself, but for his family, society and the country as a whole..... Men and women are given equal status in every sphere of life. Both have equal opportunities of spiritual evolution and salvation". (2002: 21)

Nusswan's despotic behaviour, his strict discipline bordering on the tyrannical, beating up his little sister, making her work like a domestic drudge, in short making her life miserable is against the basic tenets of his religion. The situation seems all the more ironic, when he takes her [Dina] to the fire-temple to pray – for her welfare. Dina finds the whole exercise ludicrous – “While she bowed before the sanctum, he travelled along the outler wall hung with pictures of various dustoors and high priests. He glided from display to display, stroking the garlands, hugging the frames, kissing the glass, and ending with the very tall picture of Zarathustra to which he glued his lips for a full minute.

Then, from the vessel of ashes placed in the sanctum's doorway, he smeared a pinch on his forehead, another bit across the throat, and undid his top two shirt buttons to rub a fistful over his chest. Like talcum powder, thought Dina.” (24) Mistry appears to be laughing at Nusswan for his religious absurdities, as if to say, smearing the holy ashes over the body will only make him believe that he is being purified – but would it, really? Mistry has also pointed out some of the good habits of Nusswan's personality. He also has a humane side. He went out of his way, unexpectedly for Dina, to arrange a good party for Dina's marriage. When she become a widow after a short married life of three years, he very sympathetically and affectionately brought her back home and took good care of her. But, his good behaviour was a very ransient phase. It disappeared soon after she started rejecting proposals for her marriage suggested by him. Nilufer Bharucha describes this as – “Very soon, her numbness and Nusswan's sympathy wear off and the brother and sister indulge in a typical Parsi exchange of invectives and insults.” (Bharucha, Nilufer E.: 2003: 148)

Nusswan's wife, Ruby, does not have any claims to the good looks that Dina is blessed with. She is rather dark complexioned, which is quite unusual among Parsis who pride themselves on their fair complexion and good looks. There is an incident when, Nusswan is summoned by his old grandfather to visit him. He does so, along with wife Ruby, and sister, Dina, who had in the first place lodged a complaint against him. Ruby had been instructed by Nusswan to please the old man. So when Ruby started massaging the feet of Nusswan's old Grandfather, he reached capriciously – “Enraged, he tore his foot from her grasp. ‘Kya Karta hai? Chalo, Jao!’ Too Startled at being addressed in Hindi, Ruby sat there gaping. Grandfather turned to Nusswan, ‘Doesn't she understand? What language does your ayah speak? Tell her to get off my sofa, wait in the kitchen.’ Ruby rose in a huff and stood by door. ‘Rude old man!’ She hissed. ‘Just because my skin is little dark!’” (28) This instance of Parsi social feeling of superiority is so deeply imbibed in the older generation, which is very difficult to shake off. Ruby's reaction to this is interesting. She is shocked to be spoken to in Hindi. For the Parsis, it is either ‘their’ Gujrathi [which they had accepted long ago] or English – with which they had increasingly started identifying themselves with. Hindi is to be spoken to people who did not understand Parsi – Gujrati or English – the lesser Indians (for e.g. the uneducated ayah who Ruby was mistaken to be)

When Dina's schooling was abruptly truncated by Nusswan, she hungers for knowledge. This hunger takes her to the public libraries! Some of which were equipped with music rooms. Slowly, but surely, she starts educating herself, Music provided the much needed solace her soul was looking for. She started attending free concerts. It was at these concerts that she met her future husband, Rustom. It is interesting to note here that Mistry, in an interview with Angela Lambaert, has said that he had met his wife, Freny at a music school. “Where she was taking voice and piano lessons and I was doing classes in music theory and composition.” (Lambaert, Angela: 2002)

During their courting before marriage, Rustom remarks – “Like all good Parsi parents, mine made me take violin lessons, when I was little, he laughed.” (40) About 70 pages out of a total of some 752 have been spent on the first chapter entitled ‘City by the Sea’ where Dina’s life with its Parsi background has been described by Mistry. The next three chapters describe the tailor’s lives, their history with all its caste ridden oppressions in the village, their training and turning into *darjis* from *chamars*, their eventual arrival in the city to try out their luck, their working for Dina Dalal and the various trials and tribulations regarding food and lodging in the expensive city. The Parsi thread is again picked up by Mistry, three chapters and some 152 pages later. The fifth chapter, entitled Mountains is set in an un-named hill station where the family of Maneck Kohlah stays. The mountainous regions with its snow-covered peaks and misty mornings are described most lovingly and in details. Farokh and Aban Kohlah, parents of Maneck, own a small shop, which is part of their house. It is a kind of departmental store with a good business, especially with its brand of Kohlah’s cola, which has a secret formula handed down from one generation to another. The Kohlah family loves the pure mountain air and water and everything associated with it, even though there are limited opportunities available there. Maneck has a major disagreement with his father regarding his studies. As a child, he is sent to a boarding school, which he bitterly resents. After finishing school, his father suggests he goes to study refrigeration and Air-conditioning in the city for a secure future. Maneck reads it as if his father wants to send him away – make him do something he does not like. This misunderstanding between father son is similar to the one in Mistry’s first novel where Sohrab has a tough time convincing his father, Gustad, that he is not interested in joining the IIT.

In the story, Sohrab shows adamancy and walks out in anger, whereas Maneck allows himself to be over-ruled by his father and holds a grudge against him. This troubled relationship between father and son is in keeping with the generation-gap which is shaking the foundation of Parsi family life. In a similar track, Nusswan also declares his unwillingness in becoming a doctor like his father, preferring to go into business and eventually sells off his father’s dispensary on his death. The father-son conflict is symbolic of the Parsi life in a state of transition. Farokh Kohlah is a victim of the partition of India, which created a separate Pakistan – “A foreigner drew a magic line on a map and called it the new border; it became a river of blood upon the earth. And the orchards, fields, factories, businesses, all on the wrong side of that line, vanished with a wave of the pale conjuror’s wand.” (248-249) The tremendous diminishing of family fortunes was borne with a brave exterior by him. Nevertheless, fate was cruel to him once again, this time in the guise of modernization of roads and further development of the nation.

“Mr. Kohlah watched helplessly as the asphaltting began, changing the brown rivers into black, completing the transmogrification of his beloved birthplace where his forefathers had lived as in paradise. He watched powerlessly while, for the second time, lines on paper ruined the life of Kohlah family, only this time it was an indigenous surveyor’s cartogram not a foreigner’s imperial map.” (263) Charu C. Mishra describes Farokh’s condition: “More than anybody else Farokh Kohlah is shocked to the core of his heart. He feels as if he has been displaced of the Parsis from their motherland – Iran – a fact which every Parsis still feels nostalgic about, thought it was their forefathers who actually went through the turmoil. Mistry seems to be pointing in a veiled manner to this depression, insecurity and fear which has become part of the Parsi psyche.” (2001: 8) Farokh Kohlah though being a quiet, peace loving man in his later years, can also be described as a person who is very strong willed and at times even defies the dictates of religion.

His final wish of a funeral in the Hindu way would enable his family to scatter merge with the environment he loved so much. Charu C. Mishra observes – “Primarily, his wish for cremation was an outraging one as his religion Zoroastrianism prescribes the disposal of dead body by feeding it to vultures. Anticipating that any left out part of his body might further defile the land, he even dares to violate the sanction of his religion.” (2001: 7)

Mistry seizes the opportunity to comment on a very important custom of Zoroastrianism – their last act of charity, of offering their dead body to the hungry vultures – nature’s scavengers. With many Parsis having spread out to all parts of the world from their base in Gujarat and Bombay, it is increasingly difficult to follow the primitive system of cremation. So as to preserve its sanctity, Mrs. Kohlah explains to her son, Maneck, how it had been difficult to search dastoor for prayers at the time of cremation- “How narrow-minded these people are, ‘she said, shaking her head. ‘of course we are cremating because it was Daddy’s wish, but what about people who cannot afford to transport the body? Would these priests deny them the prayers?’” (715) In the British period, the Parsis identified themselves so much with the colonizers that at times they were in ‘danger of over *Indian* identification with the British’. Everything English was considered to be not only good, but the best among available options.

This point finds reflection in the following lines from the text – “When these retired brigadiers, majors and colonels came to tea at the Kohlahs’, they arrived suited and booted, as they called it, with watches in their fobs and ties around their necks. These trappings might have seemed comical to a nationalist bent of mind, but had talismanic value for their wearers. It was all that stood between them and the disorder knocking at the door. Mr. Kohlah himself was partial to bow ties. Mrs. Kohlah herself was partial to bow ties. Mrs. Kohlah served the tea an Aynsley bone china; the cutlery was Sheffield. If it was a special dinner at Navroze or Khardad Sal, she used the Wedge wood set.” (254) Even Bharucha comments – “..... by the end of the nineteenth century, well-todo Parsi families had become greatly anglicized.

Their homes had become cluttered with heavy curved rosewood and teak furniture and Victorian bric a brac.” (2003: 33-34) Bharucha’s observation and the corresponding paragraph from the text posits details about the significance Parsis attach to articles of British origin that even celebration of special Parsi days are complete with the corresponding and special ‘English’ touch. Maneck never could reconcile himself to the fact that his parents, specially his father, have sent him far away from the hills he loved so much, to study a ‘technical’ course that they valued so much, but he did not think much of.

The result is his unhappiness at being removed from familiar, lovable surroundings, in the same manner in which his father, Farokh, is perpetually sad with first the partition and then the much loved hills being brutally scarred in the name of modernization. The behaviour of father and son are reflective of nostalgia and uneasiness of Parsi psyche at large – of having been displaced from the land of their ancestors. The character of Maneck embodies another important aspect of Zoroastrianism – a feeling of brotherhood for all human beings. Narendra Kumar says – “The true Zoroastrian way of life consists in spreading happiness around. A Parsee should regard himself as part and parcel of nature, and as such, fulfill his obligation towards all creation. A true Parsee lives not for himself but for his

family, society, and the country as a whole. Brotherhood of man is thus a cardinal doctrine of Zoroaster's message." (2002: 20)

In keeping with this sentiment, his sympathy for the tailors is understandable. He empathizes with their situation from day one of their meeting when he shares his glass of watermelon – sherbet with them, gauging very quickly that they very well cannot afford one. Later, when circumstances force the tailors to seek shelter in Dinabai's flat, she agrees to provide them with food as well, which they will eat on the verandah. To this Maneck replies, "Fine. In that case, I'll also eat on the verandah. I cannot take part in such an insult. My father feeds only stray dogs on the porch." (485) This stand of Maneck is praiseworthy and Dina Dalal also can be excused for this misdemeanor on her part taking into consideration her behaviour with the tailors as the narrative progresses.

She does not make distinctions among cups for herself and the tailors as she did in the past. In the chapter entitled, 'Sailing Under One Flag', they really do so, moving aside all distinctions of caste, creed, religion and social hierarchy. On yet another occasion, Maneck asserts that the leftovers from dinner should be fed to the stray cats who are hungry outside, rather than thrown in the garbage pail – thus extending his charity to the mute animals, treating them in the same human manner that his father used with stray dogs. Another instance of the Zoroastrian vision of world manifested in the character of Maneck is seen in the manner in which he decides to join in the funeral procession of Shankar, a beggar by profession, who was better known as the 'worm'.

When Dina could not persuade him to stay out it, she too went along with him – to be a part of the cremation procedure of a beggar, who was also a wonderful human being. Narendra Kumar rightly observes – "They mix freely with members of other faiths, sympathize with them in their grief and afflictions and work to alleviate their miser." (20) Apart from these, there are only a few other minor incidents where Mistry stresses on the Parsiness of characters – there are hardly other Parsi characters than the ones already mentioned worth discussing. Besides the 68 pages in the first chapter and some others in the fifth which centres around the Parsiness of Maneck's family, there are relatively few pages devoted by Mistry to discussions exclusively on the Parsi family. In the beginning of the discussion, two contradictory opinions of critics on the same topic had been mentioned.

A thorough reading of the novel upholds Sudha Pandya's opinion over Savita Goel and Jaydipsinh Dodiya's – 'the exclusive Parsi ethos of Mistry's earlier works is missing'. To put it into other words – "A *Fine Balance* represents an expansion from the previous tight focus on Parsi communities in Mistry's work and gives space for other social perspectives. What Nila Shah describes as 'a proliferation of' alternative histories of the excluded 'produces a pluralist anarchy on the one hand and recreates the nation it belongs to on the other?'" (Morey, Peter: 2000: 184) In an inventive manner of characterization, the author creates the persona of the administrator, the Facilitator, the Motivator, the Slumlord, the Thakur and Bal Baba. Each of these are parasites feeding on the helplessness and gullibility of the common man, destroying those who dare to question their attitude or defy their orders. The administrator represents the state machinery involved in brutal coercive sterilizations.

The facilitator and the motivator represent the corrupt bureaucracy that takes a hefty cut for providing basic amenities. The Slum-lord and the Thakur are the agents of social repression, letting loose their goons on all those who try to break free from the chains of the strict codification of social groupings. Bal Baba symbolizes the hold that

ruthless godmen have over an illiterate, superstitious populace whose monetary donations pander to the desires of the godman's body rather than the spirit. History reasserts itself in macabre ways in this fictional framework. The story of Avinash has strong allegorical undertones as it has parallels with the tragic murder case of the engineering student, Rajan, during the Emergency.

The suicide of Avinash's sisters is reminiscent of the combined suicide of three young girls in India's industrial city of Kanpur who could not bear to see their father's humiliation and social scorn for not being able to provide them respectable dowries for marriage. Encounters between the symbols of conscience and the emblems of evil invariably end in the victory of the latter. The section entitled "The Circle of Reason" reiterates this maxim and leaves the reader devastated when Mistry sums up the dominant strains of the two protagonists destiny through the words of Vasantrya Valmik: "Loss is essential. Loss is part and parcel of that necessary calamity called life." (284) This brutal truth carries the writer's consciousness which assesses the tragedy of history in subtle yet clear ideological terms. Mistry's perception of and reaction to the dark periods of Indian history are never clearly stated, but are always implicitly conveyed. The novel stands as a scathing attack on the degeneration of political morals, agonizing over the insensitivity of the ruling classes and coming down heavily on the subversion of institutions. Mistry makes no secret of his loathing for the powers that be and places the blame at the door of cruel politicians.

The central trope that unites the forces of conscience and consciousness is the image of the patchwork quilt. It is a piece of collective needlework that the protagonists indulge in after completing their respective chores. Made up of left-over fabrics from Dina's tailoring concern, the patchwork quilt takes on the function of a *leitmotif* the novel. Each piece, different in colour and texture, comes to symbolize various memorable occasions in the characters' lives and stands for the alternating cycles of happiness and sorrow. Ishwar and Omprakash sum it up with the sensitivity of an artist surveying his world: "Calling one piece and is meaningless it is connected to a happy piece-sleeping on the verandah. And the next square chapattis, then that violet tussar, when we made masala vada and started cooking together. And don't forget this georgette patch, where Beggarmaster saved us from the landlord's goondas.... Before you can name that corner, our future must become past. Time is without length or breadth. The question is, what happened during its passing and what happened is, our lives have been joined together Like these patches." (599-600) The coverlet takes on a number of metaphorical significances. On one hand, the lives of the minor fictive persona are reflected in its patches sown together. On the other, it highlights Dina's sense of despair and desolation at the end of the novel.

This is evocatively conveyed when she perceives her life as a succession of images associated with specific pieces of the quilt. It becomes her 'bed time story' as she returns to her past each night, covered by the quilt which remains incomplete as the last corner patch is never sown. More significantly, it proves to be a symbol of time as each piece constitutes the trials and tribulations or fleeting happiness that intervenes in her life and she adds a piece to mark the occasion. Omprakash observes time as a 'bolt of cloth' from which he wanted to "cut out all the bad past, snip out the scary nights, stitch together the good parts and wear it like a coat, always live happily." (383) This intense yearning for happiness only serves to focus the sordid helplessness of each of the main figures. India's pluralistic culture and languages, its extremes of rural and urban reality, parallels between the lives of individuals and the nation, multiplicity of voices and meanings, and the repudiation of the possibilities of absolute truth are all subsumed in the

complex image of the *leitmotif*. The ironic vision, brooding in tone, amorphous in realities, *A Fine Balance* requires to be read as an expression of the predicament of self in the Indian urban / rural context. In spite of the stark life that it represents, the novel reveals an underlying moral purpose and a positive commitment to justice and humanitarian concerns, Mistry, as a diasporic writer, holds literary thought and literary language in a fine balance that is as much an act of ‘affiliation and establishment’ as an act of “disavowal, displacement, exclusion and cultural contestation”.(Bhabha: 1990: 5)

Thus, the novel, on one hand, gives a realistic portrayal of trains crossing the new border, carrying nothing but corpses, the conflict between the Hindus and the Muslims, fanatics burning shops and houses, involved in arson and bloodshed and the entire country in the grip of communalism. On the other hand, it faithfully describes the communal conflicts of 1984 caused by the death of Indira Gandhi when the Sikhs were ruthlessly burnt alive. Mistry stresses the fact that in postcolonial India the plight of common people has not ameliorated and they have to face the same exploitation and injustice as in the rule of the colonizer, as one of the characters says, “Of course, for ordinary people, nothing has changed.” (581)

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