

MISTRY'S *A FINE BALANCE*: A STUDY OF EMERGENCY AND COMMON PEOPLE

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Rohinton Mistry's novel *A Fine Balance* (published in 1995) is set in the 1970s when Prime Minister Indira Gandhi had declared an Emergency in India. Emergency has been such a political act that it impacted all aspects of lives of common people of India in such a way that the conscious writers of the age had to pour in their angst and anguishes against it. Rohinton Mistry deals with Emergency not just as a political act by itself but represented it through the depiction of its effects on the lives of four significant characters in the novel – Ishwar Darji and his nephew Omprakash, Dina Dalal and her paying guest Maneck Kohlah. These four characters have been living their lives in a comparatively peaceful way when due to Emergency their lives are completely shattered leading to the question whether there is any hope left for the future of India or whether there is only a situation of despair. Between hope and despair the novel is finely balanced where Rohinton Mistry presents his anger against the atrocious effects of the Emergency.

Vinita Dhondiyal Bhatnagar is of the opinion that the ending of the novel forfeits the balance between despair and hope. (102) It is to be remembered here that the political changes that happened during the Emergency created much havoc in the socio-cultural fabric of India. In any kind of political upheaval such as that of Emergency, the richer, elite section of the society does not suffer much, the poorer sections of the society suffer its malevolent effects as they suffer the most. They are the victims of the unjust social order which is heavily tilted towards the richer sections of the society. The lower class / caste people find themselves at the receiving end of any such political upheaval.

Mistry opens his novel with a citation from Balzac's *Le Pere Goriot* –

“Holding this book in your hand, sinking back in your soft arm chair, 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.”

Probably with this citation, Rohinton Mistry wants to tell his readers that his story is not something which can be treated as fictional and therefore historically untrue; on the other hand, the portrayal is historically true as the people from the lower strata of the society suffered the most during Emergency. Rohinton Mistry left for Canada in 1975; but the impact of Emergency left such a sour taste with him that he could not but write on the suffering of the people during the Emergency.

A Fine Balance opens with a portrayal of the life of Dina Dalal, the main character of the novel in her small apartment in Bombay. She is portrayed to be a humane character who tries her best to help out the commoners like Ishwar Darji and Omprakash – the tailors – by providing them with sewing job –

“For this job, there will be no customers to measure,” she explained, “the sewing will be straight from paper patterns. Each week you have to make two dozen, three dozen, whatever the company wants, in the same style” ... “The more dresses you make, the more you earn.” (9)

Dina Dalal is a widow, living alone and by night she stitches a quilt from the scraps of clothes. She has a dominating brother Nuswaan who tries to dictate each and every aspect of her life. After the death of their father Dr. Shroff, Nuswaan has taken the role of the head of the family and it is against Nuswaan's dictates that Dina Dalal tries her best to maintain her dignity and independence.

As mentioned earlier, apart from Dina Dalal, the novel maps out the lives of three other characters – Ishwar Darji, Omprakash and Maneck Kohlah, who all meet in Dina's place. All these characters suffer from a sense of rootlessness. Whereas Dina Dalal is set up in Bombay, Ishwar Darji and Omprakash are from the rural India and Maneck from the high altitudes of the Himalayas. Through these characters from three different parts of India, Rohinton Mistry had tried to present a pan-Indian picture of that time. Dina Dalal takes in a boarder – Manek Kohlah, who has come to study refrigeration and air-conditioning maintenance from the high altitudes of the Himalayas. Dina takes up two hapless tailors too.

The second chapter of the book, *A Fine Balance*, introduces the readers to Mrs. Gupta, the manager of Au Revoir Exports. Mrs. Gupta approves of Indira Gandhi's actions on Emergency; but Dina Dalal has an opposite view about it as she feels that

it is quite irrelevant for the commoners of India and that common people are going to suffer more because of the political situation of Emergency. In such a situation, all the four main characters of the novel suffer. Whereas, Dina and Maneck, both Parsis like Rohinton Mistry himself, suffers because of the lawlessness and capriciousness of the society at large, Ishwar Darji and Omprakash are shown to be victims of the caste prejudices as well.

Omprakash and Ishwar Darji are from the chammar caste. Rohinton Mistry provides details of how the chamar caste people live their lives – by skinning the carcass, eating the meat and by tanning the hide. Mistry provides a detailed description of the lives in the village to portray how the real India still lives in the villages. There is an apparent simplicity of thought in villages which Mistry portrays very aptly. Mistry presents Ishwar Darji's readymade formula of optimism as he says – “the human face has limited space ... if you fill your face with laughing there will be no room for crying.” This apparent simple way of looking at life is juxtaposed in the novel against the grand mechanisms of the city life as well as the political machinations as the Emergency.

In the third section of the novel, the readers are encountered with the ways in which caste oppression carries on in different parts of India. Ishwar's father Dukhi, makes an attempt to do away with the caste barrier by making his son a tailor though they are chamar by caste. To do this, it needs immense courage as it is somehow breaking the caste hierarchy. Here Mistry adeptly presents the caste oppressions that go on in various parts of India. Even women are also victims of the oppressive system. Mistry writes –

“It was hard for them not to be resentful – the birth of daughters often brought them beatings from their husbands and their husbands' families ... Then they had no choice but to strangle the infant with her swaddling clothes, poison her, or let her starve to death.” (99 – 100)

It is interesting to note that the Indian government had passed laws where they have prohibited untouchability but in all practical purposes the untouchability is carried on in different parts of India as Narayan says in the novel –

“Government passes new laws says no more untouchability, yet everything is the same. The upper caste bastards, still treat is worse than animals ...

“Those kinds of things take time to change.”

“More than twenty years have passed since Independence. How much longer? I want to be able to drink from the village well, worship in the temple, walk where I like.” (142)

Narayan points out the discriminations that the people of the chamar caste along with other untouchables have to bear in an independent India where they cannot drink water from the village well, they cannot worship in the temples and even cannot walk in the places they wish to. In the name of Indian law, all are equals and there is supposedly no discriminations but for all practical purposes the untouchables live a life of ignominy where they have no rights, where their women are raped, their huts are burnt down, and they are brutally beaten up and they have nowhere to go, no body to complain to, no one to whom they can approach for justice. When Dukhi decides to make his son tailor, he has to suffer the wrath of the Thakur –

“What the ages had put together, Dukhi had dared to break asunder; he had turned cobblers into tailors, distorting society's timeless balance. Crossing the line of caste had to be punished with the utmost severity,” said the Thakur.” (147)

Dukhi wanted to vote according to his own wishes and not following the orders of the Thakur. This courageous act makes him subject to much torture and at last both Dukhi and Narayan are put to death because of the act of going against the Chieftian, Thakur's wish and voting according to one's own judgment. At this point of time, Narayan's son Omprakash thinks to take revenge against the Thakur. Ahsraf (the tailor from whom they have learnt tailoring) and Ishwar know that such dream of revenge will bring more suffering for them and therefore it was decided to send them to Bombay.

It is not that life is all rosy in Bombay. If in the village Ishwar and Omprakash were victims of caste oppression, then in the city of Bombay they are oppressed because of their class. Bombay is a glamorous city; but Rohinton Mistry instead of looking at the apparent glamour of the city decides to portray that aspect of the city which is shoddy and low-key. Ishwar and Omprakash, as they come to Bombay, they are forced to stay in *jhopadipattis* and are made to do odd jobs as labourers. But soon they find themselves in benevolence of Dina Dalal's tailoring business. There they met Maneck Kohlah and a friendship blooms between Maneck and Omprakash. The stories of suffering and plight of Omprakash and Ishwar Darji provide a deeper understanding about life to Maneck. Dina gives them the job of tailoring and selling dresses to the Au Revoir Export Company, but Omprakash in order to do financially well spies on Dina to figure out if they can directly supply to Au Revoir Company. The circumstances are such that they do not succeed in their plans and remain tailors working for Dina Dalal.

The fifth section of the novel deals with Maneck Kohlah, who, as mentioned earlier, comes to Dina's house as a boarder. From his story, we come to know how the ecological balance is destroyed by the supposed forces of development in the hilly areas and how the indigenous enterprises of the people of the hills are on a decline due to the entry of the multinationals –

“But the day soon came when the mountains began to leave them. It started with roads. Engineers in *sola topis* arrived with their sinister instruments and charted their designs on reams of paper. These were to be modern roads, they 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.” (215)

As Maneck comes to Bombay to study air-conditioning and refrigeration, he meets a dynamic student leader, Avinash, who opposes / resists the governmental forces. Avinash is heroic in his attempts to make a critique of the government policies. In the portrayal of Avinash, a glimpse of the Emergency is prevalent –

“The mood was euphoric. The students fervently believed their example would inspire universities across the country to undertake radical reforms which would complement the grassroots movement of Jay Prakash Narayan that was rousing the nation with a call to return to Gandhian principles. The changes 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 the enlightenment for all humanity.” (243)

Though through Avinash, Rohinton Mistry portrays the optimism of the youth in putting things in order; but he at the same time makes Maneck not participate in any such activism. Thus on the one hand, if there is a hope of optimism there then on the other there is despair. The novel thus carries on making a fine balance between hope and despair.

All the four main characters in the novel, suffer from a deep sense of rootlessness – whereas Ishwar and Omprakash are somehow oppressed because of the casteist oppression, Maneck is isolated as he has to leave his traditional hilly place and come to Bombay. Similarly Dina Dalal lives a life of loneliness after the death of her husband and trying her best to assert her independence from the dominating brother, Nuswaan. Thus all the four characters are lonely and isolated in their own ways because of the social and cultural circumstances. Rohinton Mistry makes these characters suffer many injustices because of their respective circumstances and yet make them endure those to ascertain the political theme that amid much adversities human beings have their ways of surviving the odds and oppressions. In other words, all the four characters try to maintain a fine balance in their respective lives in spite of the odds.

In this context, Emergency has given a political angle to the sufferings of these characters. Emergency is a political game played by the people who are in power and common people like Ishwar and Omprakash believed that it is not going to affect their lives in any way. But things happen the other way round when the commoners like Ishwar and Omprakash are the ones who are deeply affected by the effects of the Emergency.

Rohinton Mistry is able to present the menace that Emergency was with much precision and details. The two tailors – Ishwar and his nephew, Omprakash – are forced to join a crowd of twenty five thousand in Bombay slums where they gathered around the huge eight feet cut out of the Prime Minister and pass their times. Mistry writes –

“lots of lies have been spread about the emergency which had been declared specially for the people’s benefit ... whenever the Prime Minister goes, thousands gather from nices around to see her and hear her. Surely this is the mark of a truly great leader.” (212)

Ishwar and Omprakash are forced to make a crowd for the Prime Minister’s Speech but neither are they given their promised tea and free bus ride and at the end of the day the two tailors come back thirsty and tired. They respond by saying – “We could have stitched six dresses, thirty rupees lost.” (207) For the common people, the political game of Emergency is nothing but a “government *tamasaha*” (5) But even though they may feel that common people will not be affected by the government *tamasaha* of Emergency but for all practical purposes, Mistry shows how the commoners are the worst sufferers. The Prime Minister in her speech declares in the novel –

“There is nothing to worry about just because the Emergency is declared. It is a necessary measure to fight the forces of evil. It will make thing better for ordinary peoples. Only the crooks, the smugglers, the black- marketers need to worry for we will soon put them behind bars What we want to do is provide houses for the people. Enough food, so no one goes hungry. Cloth at controlled prices. We want to build schools for our children and hospitals to look after the sick. Birth control will also be available to everyone. And the government will no longer tolerate a situation where people increase the population recklessly, draining the resources that belong to all. We promise that we will eliminate poverty from our cities and towns and villages.” (265).

The first thing that the tailors suffer is that their shack is being bulldozed to the ground as the slum evacuation programme is going on. Ishwar at least have this feeling that even though their shacks were bulldozed, their sewing machines are safe in Dina Dalal’s house. They pack whatever little belongings that they have in the truck and goes about in search of a place to have a shelter for themselves. They decide at last to sleep at the railway station but it is full of beggars and urchins. At last

they find a place in the corner of the railway station and clean it with newspaper to make a place for sleep. But policeman arrives and tells them that sleeping there is prohibited. Later they come to realize that even to sleep in the railway platform they need to bribe the policeman. Thus the tailors remain unaccommodated for the night as they find no place to sleep and even Dina Dalal refuse to keep their trunk in her place.

The next blow that Ishwar and Omprakash had to survive is when they are picked up from the footpath to work as construction workers in the city's beautification project. Ishwar protests but to no avail as like street urchins they are forced into a truck so as to work as labourers. For many days the tailors are not able to do the sewing job for Dina and she gets agitated only to be calmed by Maneck. Very soon Maneck brings the news to Dina that the tailors are picked by police, thinking them to be beggars –

“It's terrible! He thinks they were mistaken for beggars – dragged into the police truck – and God knows where they are now” (324)

At this point, Dina Dalal starts sympathizing with Ishwar and Omprakash and when they finally return to Dina's place, Dina offers them her verandah to live in. Soon she gets to the extent of sharing her kitchen with them. The friendship between Omprakash and Maneck deepens and they feel delighted that they are now living under the same roof. Ishwar then decides to get his nephew married and they decide to go back to the village. Dina, on the other hand, in the absence of the tailors, buries herself in the work of quilt making. She thinks that she will be able to complete the quilt-making work before the tailors come back from the village and even decides that she will give the quilt as a present when Omprakash returns with his bride.

But at this point of time Ishwar and Omprakash get a big blow in their life as police raids the market place and Ishwar and Omprakash are forcibly transferred to a sterilization camp in their village – the *Nussbandhi mela*. Rohinton Mistry very aptly portrays the callousness of the government authorities who are keener on achieving the targets of sterilization rather than thinking about the welfare of the poor. It is a strange situation where if the government employee does not produce a required number of people for sterilization then their salary is held back.

This Rohinton Mistry is able to aptly portray the ways in which the government carried on the different aspects of the Emergency in malevolent ways. The two tailors are now in a bad state – Omprakash has been sterilized and Ishwar's feet which was wounded during the beautification project develops gangrene and his legs had to be amputated. The tailors return to Bombay where Ishwar is in a little trolley and Omprakash pulling the trolley. Thus the end of the novel shows the pathetic condition of the two tailors who have lost all hopes due to the emergency in the country.

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