



The Horror and Cruelty of Emergency Time in India Depicted by Rohinton Mistry

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Abstract:

Rohinton Mistry has emerged as a significant literary figure during the 20th century. He was born in India in 1952 and came to Canada from Mumbai in 1975. There he lived in Toronto and took employment in a bank in Toronto. As a literary figure, his four important works has gained him an immense significance. His first published collection of short-stories entitled Tales From Firozsha Baag followed by his novels Such A Long Journey, A Fine Balance and Family Matters.

Rohinton Ministry has won many awards for his writings. His novel A Fine Balance received Giller Prize and in the following year Commonwealth Writers Prize for Best Book. It was also short listed for Booker Prize and Irish Times International Fiction Prize. As a writer who lives and writes from Canada, Mistry's writings focus mainly on India. Like many expatriate writers, he continues a relationship with his country in his writings and has enriched his readers' understanding of it. As a member of Parsi Community, Mistry writes about the state of Parsi Community within the boundary of India. To quote Dr. Jaydipsinh Dodiya: One of the most remarkable features of Rohinton Mistry's fiction is that it brilliantly captures the crowded, throbbing life of India.

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Mistry prefers to write about India, which engages his imagination. Living in Canada and writing about India. Mistry is fully aware of several drawbacks of India's social and political life, as is discernible in his novels.

A Fine Balance has been carved out artistically by Rohinton Mistry. The novelist has covered the most volatile and violent spectrum of the contemporary history, which shook the social – political stagnation of the country. Mistry's own concept of India in the Emergency apparently seems to be larger than life size, a mixture of joy and woe, heaven and hell. The novel is remarkably intense and enigmatic in delineating its colourful characters like Shroff, kahlah or the tailors. The hidden desires of the underdogs and their long cherished aspiration for delightful life weave the centrality of the novel. The novel brilliantly presents a panoramic picture of the poor struggling for their 'survival of the fittest' in the metropolitan city where 'a roof to cover the head' is a dream.

The subject of this novel is simply to describe: the horror and cruelty of sub-continental life, especially as lived by its poor and vulnerable. Thematically, the novel articulates the sagacity of the cultures which are very much suppressed. Simultaneously the novel deals with the life and longing of the middle class which craves for honour and dignity. In addition to this, the age-old problem of caste and communalism, the brunt of which has been borne by the down trodden, has been duly focused. Mistry perceives India as "metropolitan, sophisticated, noisy and angry."

The fine balance of the title of the novel is struck by opening the book with the stoppage of the suburban train service because of suicide by an unidentified character and closing the book with a similar stoppage of train service due to a suicide by one of the main young aspiring characters whose dreams of India are shattered so badly that he decides to commit suicide. Moreover in the epilogue, the country's history too is seen to have travelled a full circle—from 1947 when a Muslim has to abandon his fez because sporting a fez in a Hindu neighborhood was as fatal as possessing a foreskin in a Muslim one to 1984 when a Sikh has to give up his turban, to cut his hair and shave off his beard to escape being massacred by the goons seeking revenge for the murder of Indira Gandhi. As T. Vijay Kumar notices: “*A Fine Balance* is a depressing novel set in a depressing period of Indian history.”

The novel starts with Mistry telling the story through the cynical voice of the student Maneck, sent to study in Bombay staying as a paying guest at Dina Dalal, a Parsi widow. At the same time, the tailors Ishvar and Omprakash, seeking refuge in Bombay due to caste violence in their village, get employment at the house of Dina Dalal. Thus these characters from different class back-grounds start inter-acting with each other and get inter-connected. The four main characters of this novel suffer from a sense of rootlessness. Oppressive caste violence has driven Ishvar and Omprakash from their traditional occupation to learn the skills of tailoring and from a rural background to overcrowded Bombay. Similarly Maneck moves from the invigorating atmosphere of his home in the hills to Bombay for higher education. Dina has grown up in Bombay but her sense of independence after her husband's accidental death keeps her away from her family. Social circumstances, loneliness and a sense of uprootedness bring them together and forge a bond of understanding to maintain 'a fine balance' in their lives. In this process, the author implies that at various levels of existence, there is a see-saw struggle between happiness and despair. Life never seems to follow a placid course in *A Fine Balance*.

There are always upheavals, whether at the slums where Ishvar and Omprakash reside in Bombay or problems of food and political disturbance at the residential block at Maneck's college, amongst the beggars in the streets or the emergence of competition which shatters Maneck's monopoly of the cola drinks in his hometown. However, in *A Fine Balance*, most upheavals take place because of the imposition of Internal Emergency. The evictions of the poor from the cities, the forced labour camps, the sterilizations are the manifestations of the Internal Emergency. The novelist also shows a nexus that emerges between the police and the established hierarchy either the upper dominance in the villages or the land/building mafia in Bombay.

With the depiction of Emergency, Mistry makes some revealing political insights. The transition in rural life, the change in aspirations of the lower castes, the attempts by the upper castes to preserve the old order is aptly delineated which is mentioned through a major instance in the violence perpetuated by Thakar Dharamsi and his henchmen against Narayan's family during the week of parliamentary elections. During the election Narayan tries to assert his democratic right and cast his own vote. For his defiance, Narayan and the other two "Chamars" are forcibly gagged, flogged and tortured and they were hanged in the village square. Then the 'Goondas' of Thakur burnt the family of Dukhi (Narayan and Ishvar's father), Roopa, Radha and the daughters. Here Mistry implies that the needless arrogance of the upper castes in trying to maintain social supremacy led to the consolidation and emergence of the Dalit consciousness in Indian politics. As Novy Kapadiya writes:

The social tensions in the villages, the changing aspirations of the lower castes and caste based violence, is so well delineated, so well woven into the flow of the narrative that it makes Rohinton Mistry a very astute political novelist.

Rohinton Mistry does put the Emergency (1975-77) in his fine balance and tries objectively to weigh it through a variety of weights and counterweights. Mistry's deft handling of Internal Emergency provides a vivid and graphic picture of the turbulent times when most of the parliamentary opposition,

along with thousands of trade unionists, students, and social workers were put behind the bars to enable Indira Gandhi to retain power.

The hoardings of Indira Gandhi and the painting of Government slogans are just the outer trappings which cannot deceive people. A campaign with a euphemistic name, 'City Beautification Scheme', actually results in the bulldozing of the slums and forcing the roofless poor to pass their rights on pavements or railway platforms, carrying, like Ishvar and Om their things in boxes or bundles every day to their places of work. When a party worker tells this to men and women, the reaction is interesting:

The Prime Minister's message is that she is your servant, and wants to help you; she wants to hear things from your own lips. "If she is our servant, tell her to come here!" someone shouted.

Ishvar and Narayan receive terrible beating from the teacher for defiling the tool of learning and knowledge. It is a forbidden world for the low-caste. Dukhi's complaint to Pandit Lalluram is futile. However Dukhi's defiance of the caste system by sending his little sons Ishvar and Narayan to Ashraf is a welcome step in the right direction. It is significant to note that only Ashraf, Muslim tailor in town, sews clothes for Dukhi as no Hindu tailor would sew for an untouchable. The suggestion is that the curse of untouchability is deeply ingrained in the Hindu psyche. Even the Parsi widow, Dina Dalal, is capable of feeling for untouchables by giving shelter to Ishvar and Om, the two chammars. People like Lalluram have to come out of their shells of hypocrisy if the line between the touchables and the untouchables has to be really erased. Otherwise, it will be difficult, not impossible, to realize the dream of Mahatma Gandhi, which is possible only by breaking the timeless chain of caste.

Apart from these, the lives of all major characters of the novel are blighted by the Emergency. It leaves Maneck Kohlah crushed under the train. Dina Dalal a prematurely old and purblind, slaves her years out in the house of her brother. And the two poor tailors struggling only for a livelihood are utterly-crushed-Ishvar and Om converted as beggars on the streets for small charities, till death comes mercifully to release them from this burden called life. Avinash is also one of the victims of the Emergency Rule. His parents are not rich enough to offer dowry to his three unmarried sisters who are ultimately forced to commit suicide. Mistry has created Vasantrao Valmiki's character to explain the significance of the title *A Fine Balance*. His words in the novel are quite meaningful revealing the trauma of Emergency as well:

There is always hope-hope enough to balance our despair. Or we would be lost. After all, our lives are but a sequence of accidents a clanking chain of chance events. A string of choices, casual or deliberate, which add up to that one big calamity we call life.

A Fine Balance is a microcosm of life in general and political disturbances, which Mistry keenly perceived around him when he was in India. He portrays the bleak realities and horrifying implications of the anarchy and exploitation that could go on in the name of discipline, beautification and progress in a democratic country. The harshness of Emergency on Indian Political arena is observed with a quotation, from Balzac's *Le Pere Goriot* in the begging of the novel:

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 fiction. All is true.

While going through the politically most sensitive aspect of the novel i.e. Emergency, it can be said that *A Fine Balance* weaves together a tale of the 1970s India and the midst of a state of Emergency through the lives of its four characters. The Emergency intrudes obtrusively into the lives of all of

these characters leading to their eventual loss and destruction. The overall scenario is grim. *A Fine Balance* thus, reveals the dark period of Emergency (June 25, 1975 – March 21, 1977) which remains a blot on the history of post – Independence India. It also throws light on the dirty political game played by the so called bigwig politicians during the Emergency that made common man insecure and unsafe.

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