



## Presaging a Disaster: Eco-Critical Concerns in Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance*

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### Abstract

In this age, when interdisciplinary studies are the norm in literary criticism, Eco-criticism as a literary concept and theory is blossoming and garnering wide popularity and is closely associated with the ecological concerns of modern society. The present-day world is aware of the hazardous impact of the ecological imbalance threatening mankind. Since the relationship and interdependence between man, animals and plants has been established and accepted, any sort of disturbance in one affects the other. Ecology is a relatively new branch of scientific study but it deals with the theories and principles which govern the relationship between these elements of nature. Since development of man is dependent on its natural world, a great stress is being laid on the close relationship between the two. A booming population accompanied by the avarice of mankind has already cast clouds of gloom and darkened the healthy relationship between man and his natural world. Since this lopsided relationship is a matter of grave concern and a matter of discussion at important forums all over the globe, literary critics could not refrain from voicing their concern regarding this important issue. The present paper is a humble endeavour to focus on the ecological concerns shared by Rohinton Mistry in his novel *A Fine Balance*.

**Keywords:** Eco-criticism, Ecology, Nature, Nostalgia.

### Introduction:

Growing concern for ecology has affected even the life of common man today. And since literature reflects life and focuses on

contemporary issues, writers who had earlier merely eulogised nature and celebrated its power, have turned the spotlight on the imbalance in the ecology and the threatening impact of the continuing misuse of natural

resources by mankind. This growing concern of the writers, followed by accompanying critical and critical works, has resulted in the birth of a new literary theory – Eco-criticism.

The term Ecocriticism was first used by William Rueckert in his essay "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism" in 1978. However, a few works of literary criticism, like Raymond Williams's *The Country and the City* (1973) and Annette Kolony's *The Lady of the Land*, which studied the landscape as female and had appeared before 1978, may be cited as examples of the same. These works were spurred by ideas related to environment and raised basic questions which were to grapple the minds of ecocritics. As a movement, Ecocriticism gained momentum in the 1990s, predominantly after it was promoted in the Western Literature Association meeting, when Cheryll Glotfelty advocated for its use in the field of criticism. In the same meeting, Glen Love seconded the call for 'eco-criticism' and since then the term has blossomed. However, it was in 1996 with the publication of two seminal books – *The Ecocriticism Reader* edited by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm and *The Environmental Imagination* by Lawrence Buell – that the term got official sanction and literary currency.

Like all critical concepts, ecocriticism too has become a fertile tract watered by the views of various disciplines and their propounders. However, the basic premise governing it is that human culture and the physical world are connected and dependent on each other – both affect and are affected by each other. Broadly speaking, ecocriticism is the study of literature and environment which takes the help of other discipline and tries to analyse the environment as also to find solutions to the contemporary environmental situation. What Glotfelty says in *The Ecocriticism Reader*, is generally accepted as the working definition of Ecocriticism – that "ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (Glotfelty & Fromm,

1996, p. xviii). She also upheld that the most important goal of this approach towards literature is to bring back the deemed dignity for the "undervalued genre of nature writing" (Glotfelty & Fromm, 1996, p. xxxi). This approach has enlarged and gradually ecocriticism has widened its base from being merely restricted to nature writing, Romantic poetry and canonical literature to incorporate within its domain films, television, theatres, animal stories, architecture and even scientific narratives. As it has borrowed freely from methodologies and theoretical approaches even ethical questions come under the purview of the ecocritics. That is why, critics like Estok (2001) highlight this aspect of the term when he says "Ecocriticism has distinguished itself, debates notwithstanding, firstly by the ethical stand it takes, its commitment to the natural world as an important thing rather than simply as an object of thematic study, and, secondly by its commitment to making connections" (p. 220).

This idea of studying the connectivity between nature and culture, society and environment lies at the core of this study. Earlier writers used to eulogise nature, cherishing its bounty showered on mankind, not underestimating the other benign influences like peace, tranquility which men garnered in its lap. At the same time, the profound and intense power of nature over man's life was also discussed by some writers. The impact of environment on human civilizations has been so grave that entire civilizations have been wiped out. It is only recently that the misuse of natural resources by man and the rapid industrialization, devoid of any moral or ethical concerns has been creating waves of concern at important forums. In a recent study, Estok (2005) argued that ecocriticism is not merely "the study of Nature or natural things in literature; rather it is any theory that is committed to effecting change by analyzing the function – thematic, artistic, social, historical, ideological, theoretical, or otherwise – of the natural environment, or aspects of it,

represented in documents (literary or other) that contribute to material practices in material worlds" (pp. 16-17). Such an approach takes in the functional aspect of ecocriticism, rather of cultural ecology—a branch of ecocriticism. The followers of this school of thought uphold the view that some literary texts have an ecological or rejuvenating or revitalizing function in the cultural system and so they draw out comparisons between ecosystems and such imaginative literary texts (Zapf, 2008).

#### Discussion:

Nature has made its appearance in various capacities in the works of Indo-Anglian writers and also in those of writers of the Indian diaspora. Not only in the past but even in the works of contemporary writers we can hear their clarion call for the restoration of the glory and rapidly depleting natural resources. Rohinton Mistry, the Indian writer who has been living in Canada since 1975, shows his concern for the hills and its flora and fauna in his novel, *A Fine Balance*. The author introduces four characters as they meet in the commercial capital of India, Mumbai. And thence on, their personal histories are so linked or intertwined as to weave out the fabric of the narrative. Dina, the elderly Parsi spinster, engages Ishwar and Om as tailors and initially has a functional relationship with them. Both, Ishwar and Om, who have migrated to Mumbai, have their own sorrowful past which they have left behind for greener pastures and better economic pursuit. Maneck, the young boy who joins them, has come to attain an educational degree and is the son of Dina's old friend Koban Sodawalla. Before her marriage to Farokh Kohlah, Aban also resided in Mumbai but since then had shifted to the hills with her husband. Maneck born and brought up in the hills, is reluctant to leave his home, even for studying, and is literally forced by his parents for they envisage a better future for him after attaining a technical degree from a college. Mistry traces the great fondness of Maneck and his family for the hills.

Not only Farokh but even Aban, the girl from a city whom he marries, falls in love with "the natural beauty of the place" (Mistry, 2003, p. 204). Even her parents had approved of the boy linking his "fine bearing ... to the healthy life in the mountains," (Mistry, 2003, p. 204) Farokh had suffered the brutal assault of that menacing event in the history of the sub-continent—the Partition. The inheritance of the Kohlah family, the fields, orchards and contracts for supplying provision, which he had tended with care, was suddenly snatched from his due to the cartographic changes. All that he owned now was a small general store in the hill town. Both the husband and wife began to nurture it and even is such a trying situation Aban drew succour from it as she "reveled in the magnificent view of the valley from the back of the shop. Life in the hills suited her perfectly" (Mistry, 2003, p. 205). Aban, though a city-dweller, finds peace and contentment with her family in the lap of luxuriant nature. Farokh's initial fear that she would miss the glitter of city-life and decide to return once the novelty of the new locale would tire her, is proved wrong. Mistry highlights the fact that despite losing a large part of his family fortune, Farokh and his family love and relish their simple life in the hills. Meeting their daily expenses and needs from the small general store, the family is quite happy and content. Of course, the secret soft-drink formula known as kaycey, handed over by his father, adds to the popularity of the shop and also to the family's fortune. Young Manek couldn't but share the joy of life in the hills of both his parents. His love for the hills, forests and valleys is quite strong and any sojourn makes him sad and nostalgic.

A similar nostalgia grips him when the sight of a steaming bowl of water in the bathroom in Mumbai reminds him of the dreamy morning mist enveloping the mountains and his home. Mistry paints a beautiful word-picture as he traces, through his protagonist, the languorous movement of the mist—".....he could picture it: at this hour it

would be swirling fancifully, encircling the snow-covered peaks. Just after dawn was the best time to observe the slow dance, before the sun was strong enough to snatch away the veil. And he would stand at the window, watch the pink and orange of sunrise, imagine the mist tickling the mountain's ear or chucking it under the chin...." (Mistry, 2003, p. 201). Such a heartfelt description can only be possible when the writer is deeply aware of his surroundings and is also in love and at pace with it. The description of the hills and mist as if they were two buddies, playing and making merry, is an approach undertaken by writers who are eco-friendly or concerned with the aesthetic aspect of nature. However this aesthetic appeal is not the only concern of eco-friendly writers. The harmonious balance amongst the various elements of nature, which is jinxed when disturbed by man, calls for a genuine ethical concern for the writer sees the balance in nature being axed by man.

Farokh's love for the mountains is insatiable. Even after losing an eye in an accident while preparing Kohlah's cola, he would often be seen taking long walks through the hillside forest. Wearing an eye patch, on the injured eye, he would drink-in the beauty of the great fountain-head of nature. It is not only the Kohlah family which is in love with the hills and the mountains. Farokh's friends, like Major Grewal, who have decided to settle in the serene surroundings, have done so for they too crave the cool climes, the tranquil atmosphere of the hills and its flora and fauna.

Like Maneck, who has grown-up in the hills, loves the place and has a deep association with it. His pleasure-filled days of his childhood constitute the best phase of his life – "his happy childhood universe" (Mistry, 2003, p. 210) – and have become the parameter of his happiness. He resents the idea of leaving his home in the hills and is unhappy when he is sent to a boarding school – for him it is an instance of "betrayal" (Mistry, 2003, p. 211) for every single day he would be haunted with memories of his "house,

his parents, the shop, the mountains" (Mistry, 2003, p. 211). Even when he had accompanied his mother to the city for a brief spell, when he was six, he had missed the hills and on his return had declared, "I am never going to leave the mountains again....Never, ever"(Mistry, 2003, p. 215). This had pleased his father too. When he goes for his higher education to Bombay, flashes from his past life keep visiting him. "His homesick imagination made him see the hike float through the fog again, passing from Nimbus to nothing" (Mistry, 2003, p. 201).

The father-son duo decide never to leave the hills "But the day soon came when the mountains began to leave them" (Mistry, 2003, p. 215). It is the decision of the government to connect the hill-town to the cities. People residing in the hills are shocked at this sudden change. Targeting the government and the officials for their unmindful policies of expansion, Mistry (2003) scathingly writes, "There were to be modern roads,... 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" (p. 215). So, unnerved and threatened by these sudden changes, ushered in the name of modernization and urbanization, Farokh and his friends like Major Grewal call in meetings to condemn "the flawed development policy, the short sightedness, the greed that was sacrificing the country's natural beauty to the demon of progress" (Mistry, 2003, p. 215). Playing the role and performing the duties of a sensitive and conscious and responsible writer, Mistry raises a voice of protest through the denizens of the hills. Petitions signed and protests lodged by them fell on deaf ears of the authorities concerned. The brutal assault by technological forces continued unabated and the road inched upward devouring everything that came in its way. Agonized at the ill-treatment of the landscape Mistry writes,

The sides of their beautiful hills were becoming gashed and scarred. From

high on the slopes, the advancing tracks looked like rivers of mud defying gravity, as though nature had gone mad. The distant thunder of blasting and the roar of earth-moving machines floated up early in the morning, and the dreaminess of the dawn mist turned to nightmare. (p. 216)

He vents his displeasure when he uses words like “gashed” and “scarred” ringing with negativism and cynicism edging on harshness to convey the rape of the mountains. And in thus drawing the attention of the readers towards contemporary problems related to ecology, Mistry emerges as a responsible writer.

This act by the authorities, in the name of growth or development, has a dubious distinction. On the one hand it promises more business to the hill-people (for the roads would increase connectivity), and on the other it strikes at their very sense of identity. In his youthful exuberance, Maneck likes the change for he associates the road with modernization, with opening up of new avenues, wider vistas, and better business. For Farokh, the change is ominous. The noxious fume of the lorries seemed to his nostrils and the unpleasant throb of the engine ripped his eardrums. Umbraged by this ‘malevolent growth’ (Mistry, 2003, p. 217), Farokh Kohlah felt that his senses were being assaulted by this sudden ‘invasion’ (Mistry, 2003, p. 217). Words like ‘assault’ and ‘invasion’ are strong, hinting at a sense of violation, intrusion, interference—something done without the will or permission of a person. Here Farokh is one with nature and these modes of human activity aiming at progress or development are infringing on their privacy, intruding into their serene domain.

Here Mistry presents the stereotyped picture of nature seen in most literary texts— as heaven, abode of bliss, the virgin land, Arcadia. Farokh envisions his birthplace as such—the place “where his forefathers had lived as in paradise” (Mistry, 2003, p. 216). This vision of

haloed past is nothing less than sacramental and any alteration in this picture-perfect state was sacrilege. Letting go of the vista of the bygone days was not acceptable to him. The destruction of the hills evokes, once again, in Farokh a sense of displacement and a fear of losing his identity. The first-time similar fears had gripped him during the days of the Partition. Now, with the trees being cut down and the rivulets going dry, not to talk of the noise and pollution, he feels alienated. The long walks which were so pleasurable for him had now become ‘a death watch, to see what was still standing and what had been felled’ (Mistry, 2003, p. 219). Earlier on his walks, he was like a curious child, waiting for nature to spring new surprises for him in the form of wildflowers or a new born rivulet. Now, he would be filled with grief on finding an old boulder, where he had once sat, blown up by dynamite. Even when he came across an old tree, he would wonder if his old friend would be there for him the next day. The place where his forefathers had lived and which he had not forsaken was now facing savage action. He associated his very existence with the greenery, misty dawns, the purity and cleanliness of the air and the hills. He is heartbroken and helpless “as the asphaltic began, changing the brown rivers into black.... (Mistry, 2003, p. 216). The invasion and devastation of his paradise is made to correspond with the devastation of his family. Since the economic prospect of the family store is not very promising, Farokh decides to send Maneck to the city, which Maneck resents.

Mistry’s narrative highlights the idea of ecological awareness and shares shelf with similar works by other writers as they are united in their common goal of generalising the awareness about environmental concerns and anthropogenic activities in this anthropocene epoch. Man and the manipulative maneuvers of his machines take its toll on the surroundings causing ecological imbalance. Keeping in sync with the antagonism of Farokh, nature too revolted. “Then the seasons revolted. The rain, which used to make things grow and ripen,

descended torrentially on the denuded hills, causing mudslides and avalanches. Snow, which had provided an ample blanket for the hills, turned skimpy" (Mistry, 2003, p. 217). Farokh derives a perverse satisfaction at this change. Year after year, the seasons marched on, along the path not frequented by them earlier, changing the landscape and eventually the flora and fauna of the hills. This began to impact Farokh's psyche and he is broken, deep down inside. A myriad of emotions well up inside him on a walk, as he watches,

....That dusk had fallen: the sunset was forfeited behind the pall. And the entire scene was so mean and squalid by twilight, so utterly beyond his ability to accept or comprehend. He felt lost and frightened. Waves of anger, compassion, disgust, sorrow, failure, betrayal, love—surged and crashed, battering and confusing him. For what? And why was it? If only he could.... (Mistry, 2003, p. 218)

Battered and bruised physically, Farokh cries silently for the loss.

### Conclusion

Farokh's attachment with the hills is something deep, spiritual. In fact, this bond is so strong that he wants to be a part of it even after his death. Despite being a Parsi, he wants to be cremated and his ashes strewn across the hills, the very places where he loved to take long walks. Although it is against his religion, his last wishes are fulfilled by Aban and Maneck. Farokh believed that with the assimilation of his ashes with the places of his desire his union with nature could be complete. It would give him the peace, solitude, the joy, the bliss which he associated with his yesteryears. Life in the hills is symbolic here of a life of bliss and innocence—the prenatal state—a chunk of Paradise. In fact, this association of the hills and serene climes with the good old days is a reflection of the view held by certain critics who observe that in the Western thought the term 'nature' is used to

express the standard of human values, so much so that whatever is good is associated or identified with "natural or according to nature" (Lovejoy, 1965, qtd. in Branch, 1994). This view is not something specific to the Western thought alone but is more or less acknowledged the world over.

Even Maneck dislikes his banishment from his homeland. When he returns finally for his father's funeral, he feels like a lost child, trying to seek sermon in nature, as he wails. The world of his childhood, the hills and the lifestyle, was receding. He too "...felt the despair his father had felt as the familiar world slipped from around him, the valleys gashed and ugly, the woods disappearing. Daddy was right, he thought, the hills were dying...." (Mistry, 2003, p. 595). The remorse at the loss of hills, forests and rivers is akin to the lament of Ruskin Bond for the same in his write-ups. Bond's love for the hills finds an echo in Mistry's love for the same in this narrative of his. Hills and the scenic beauty, for both, are the very essence of human lives—their *raison-deter*. When they are threatened, human existence gets jeopardised.

Writers who are aware that it is time we started a green re-think, try to direct the attention of the readers to such issues. The cry to save nature is a global issue and people from every walk of life have placed it with similar severe issues plaguing the social order. It can also be observed that ecological issues are directly or indirectly related to culture. This narrative of Mistry can be seen as his contribution to the study of environmental harmony. Writers whose works focus on this aspect firmly believe in and also uphold in their write-ups that human beings are born and embedded in nature and so depend on it for sustenance. Through Farokh and his view about life, Mistry upholds the same. In fact, the entire Kohlah family and their other friends have settled in the lap of nature and it is nature alone which sustains them.

Since, ecocriticism is “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (Glotfelty, 1996, p. xviii), Mistry makes his contribution by focusing on the experience of the Kohlah family “primarily in a naturally and consequently in a culturally shaped world: the joys of abundance, sorrows of deprivation, hopes for harmonious existence and fears of loss and disaster” (Cohen, 2004, p. 10).

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