



SOCIAL EXPLOITATION AND ECOLOGICAL DEGRADATION: CONVERGENCE OF ENVIRONMENTAL HISTORY AND ECOLOGICAL CATASTROPHE IN MISTRY'S "A FINE BALANCE"

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ABSTRACT

Natural ecosystems involve a network of interactions among various organisms and between organisms and their environment. These dynamic interrelations among various personal and environmental factors lead to the principles of Social ecology, which asserts that nearly all our present ecological problems arise from deep-rooted social problems. Unless we clearly recognize this, we will surely fail to see that the hierarchical mentality and class relationships that permeate society will give rise to the very idea of dominating the natural world.

This paper is an attempt to read Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* as an ecologically conscious text that analyzes the problems of existence mostly concerned with the life sustaining needs of politically less powerful people or castes. It also intends to elucidate how the environmental history of India as well as the eco-sensitive creative writings of Indian writers in English like Mistry's converges on the theme of the ecological catastrophe, which is imminent in a biologically diverse country like India.

The life of the tailors is an apt illustration of the absurdity of human existence, where human will has no power over the illogical course of events. Human well being is inseparably interconnected with the ecological health of the land. The novel very eloquently articulates the necessity of preserving the integrity of one's environment and of keeping an ecological fine balance.

Key Words: Ecosystem, Social ecology, Environmental history, Ecological catastrophe

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Natural ecosystems involve a network of interrelations among various organisms and between organisms and their environment. These dynamic interrelations among various personal and environmental factors lead to the principles of Social ecology, which pays explicit attention to the social, institutional, and cultural contexts of people and their environmental relations. Social ecology, a critical

social theory founded by Green author and activist Murray Bookchin espouses a reconstructive, ecological, and ethical approach to society.

Social ecology asserts that nearly all our present ecological problems arise from deep-rooted social problems. The notion that man must dominate nature emerges directly from the domination of man by man. "Owing to its inherently

competitive nature, bourgeois society not only pits humans against each other, it also pits the mass of humanity against the natural world... The plundering of the human spirit by the market place is paralleled by the plundering of the earth by capital" (Bookchin 25).

This indiscrete human interference in the natural world poses a threat not only to human beings but to all organisms that constitute the natural world. "Ecological criticism shares the fundamental premise that human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it" (*Ecocriticism Reader* xix). Environmental history also explores the ways in which the biophysical world influenced the course of human history and the ways in which people have thought about and tried to transform their surroundings.

This paper is an attempt to read Rohinton Mistry 's *A Fine Balance* as an ecologically conscious text that analyzes the problems of existence mostly concerned with the life sustaining needs of politically less powerful people or castes. It also intends to elucidate how the environmental history of India, as well as the eco-sensitive creative writings of Indian writers in English like Mistry's converges on the theme of the ecological catastrophe, which is imminent in a biologically diverse country like India.

A Parsi Gujarati of Indian origin, Mistry, with his twice displaced background, as a member of the minority community in his mother land and as an immigrant in Canada, shows through his third novel *A Fine Balance* how the surroundings displaces his main characters, and delineates the multifarious strategies involved in their struggle opting for a space for survival. The power of the state is always unequally exercised and Mistry narrates the bitter reality of social imbalances encountered by the caste subordinates:

Besides tanning and leather-working, Dukhi learned what it was to be a Chammar, an untouchable in a village society. No special instruction was necessary... Like the filth of dead animals which covered him and his father as they worked the ethos of the caste system was smeared everywhere. (*AFB* 96)

The novel evolves round the maintenance and loss of balance in the spaces they occupy. But it is certainly not an idealized locale: superstition and violence are rampant, and gender inequalities along with caste-based brutality exists, where the lower castes are beaten, tortured and killed for a number of trivial offences. The experience of the two the central characters, the tanner-turned-tailors Ishvar and Omprakash Darji, explores the poignancy of the marginalized and dispossessed in relation to the role of caste. They have felt the full force of upper caste disapproval, vented on their family for violating time-honored stasis by daring to alter their occupation, from tanners to tailors, hoping to alter their position in the hierarchical social chain. Though Government passes new laws against untouchability, the situations continue without much change even after years of independence. "For politicians, passing laws is like passing water ... It all ends down the drain" (*AFB* 143).

The differing domains of the novel underline its concern with space. The tailors Ishvar and Om seeking refuge from caste upheavals come to Dina Dalal in the city in search of employment. The city also disempowered Om and Ishvar, the representatives of the rural poor. They soon become victims of bitter social imbalances, goes through an identity crisis facing immediate constraints of daily livelihood and limited opportunities. If they are oppressed by caste in the first part of the novel, they undergo class exploitation based on economic status later and are always at the receiving end of the power politics and become part of the cramped spaces as they reach the city.

As in the case of all 'ecological refugees', the uprooting of the tailors from their natural habitat and replanting them in the new atmosphere in the city, widen their hope of survival. But as the tailors struggle to make a living in the slums they realize that the inequalities of caste in rural India are merely substituted through those of class in the city. Their presence within the structure of the novel represents the average subaltern in the context of both urban and rural India. As Nandini Bhautoo observes:

Their trajectory allows them to encounter the dispossessed of both rural and urban

areas. ..They are at the receiving end of insane plans of the government ... which lead to loss of homes and freedom of the poor. Om and Ishvar's experience of suffering from village to town and then city allows Mistry to speak of powerlessness and oppression, in both city and country as a continuum. (55)

Though Ishvar tries to instill hope in Om for a better future and attempts to pacify his nephew he expresses his anguish, "I am sick of the city. Nothing but misery ever since we came. I wish I had died in our village. I wish I had also burned to death like the rest of the family" AFB(91).

Mistry is authentic in his portrayal of India during the time of emergency, the bleak realities and horrifying implications of the anarchy and exploitation in the name of discipline, beautification and progress in a democratic country. The shanty town where the tailors live is knocked down in a government "beautification" program. They lament on the disappearance of their houses and emerging laws: "But how can they destroy our homes, just like that? ... For the poor there is no justice, we had next to nothing, now it's nothing!" (AFB 295).

The tailors' next ordeal is the experience of being lifted from the streets and both are forcibly sterilized and Omprakash is castrated. They return to the city; Omprakash clearly unable to marry and Ishvar unable to work as both his legs have been amputated because of the gangrene that sets in after his sterilization operation. They are eventually forced to become beggars on the streets of the big city. As Valmik philosophizes on life: "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 big one calamity we call life" (AFB 564).

Along with caste discrimination gender inequality also plays a pivotal role in dislocating the major characters in the novel. Dina Dalal, meets with a lot of social imbalances and is pushed into a subordinate position within the family due to the untimely death of her wealthy parents. However she struggles to maintain her independence. She defies her acutely class-conscious brother and decides to marry the man of her choice, Rustom Dalal, a mere

compounder. Dina and Rustom in *A Fine Balance* is a happy couple. But still, happiness eludes her as Rustom dies in an accident. In order to keep on in the same apartment hired by her husband and to meet the expenses, Dina starts to work for Mrs Gupta of Au Revoir Exports, and hires two tailors to do the sewing and takes in a boarder for extra income.

In conjunction with all this Dina is engaged in quilting, a creative process which serves a significant symbol in her development as an independent woman. Judy Elsley asserts that "quilt making can bring about a healing process, because the quilt maker ceases to be a passive woman who is torn. In turning being torn into tearing quilt making turns object into subject" (Quilts as Text(iles) 10). So the act of quilting can be affiliated with Dina's independence and control she assumes in her life and in the lives of others. The quilter strives to achieve a certain balance and order from the unsymmetrical patterns available.

Dina thus holds on for long to her fragile independence. But in spite of the many dreams and hopes for independent living, she is forcefully thrown out of her rented apartment. Deserted by the tailors and Maneck she has no choice but to move in with her brother and his family, where she is relegated to the role of an unpaid house keeper. K C Belliappa rightly observes: "Mistry's fictional rendering makes us believe that life consists of such events, even as he highlights the distinct possibilities of the extraordinary happenings in life as brilliantly expounded in the coming together of four protagonists of the novel" (208).

Maneck Kohlah, who returns from Dubai after eight long years is characterized as a very sensitive being who cannot cope up with the misfortunes around him. All of these encounters from the death of his father in the mountains to the loss of his makeshift home in the city, the realization of the pitiable state of existence of his friends as beggars, the loss of his energetic and vibrant colleague at the college, Avinash, the suicide of his three sisters, the demeaning of Dina to the role of an unpaid maid in her brother's residence forsaking her independence which she always cherished right from her childhood, and the understanding that he

can never be united with his one time friends who resided together in Dina's flat, puts him in extreme despair, that he ends his life by jumping onto the tracks before an oncoming train.

Analysing the History of the Environment we realize that the sedimented histories of exploitation and struggle in terms of caste, class and gender leads to ecological degradation. Maneck recollects his experiences as a child in this mountain side village. Mrs Kohlah reminisces its prosperity: "How wonderful life used to be, how sweet and healthy the air – any time you felt sick or tired, all you had to do was step outdoors, breathe deeply, and you felt better immediately, no need to swallow any medicine or vitamin tablets. Nowadays the whole atmosphere has changed" (AFB 590). The advent of multinational companies disturbs the quietness of the mountains, posing a serious problem for the indigenous mountain dwellers, affecting their lives adversely.

Father's "topophilia" or love for the place he lives is where nature seems to blend itself into the consciousness of the people. This is what sustains them and these emotions allow them to prosper in their environment through activities of cultural significances that not only provide basic economical survival, but are artistically creative in reinforcing the values they live by. As Rao explains: "the individual human being's body is a microcosm of the great cosmic body; ...Nature and the environment are not outside us; they are not alien and hostile to us. They are an inseparable part of our existence (qtd. in "Tailoring Sustainability" 187). Maneck's scattering of the ashes of his father in the wilderness of the mountains, replicates Mr. Kohlah's deep affection and inseparableness from his environment. As Tuan in *Space and Place* explains, "What begins as space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value" (qtd. in Hasteline 179). Yet displacement to other environments often fails to sustain migrants and refugees. Equally, for new arrivals from the country, the city forms a daunting, unknowable space, very different from the manageable dimensions of the rural village.

Ishvar and Omprakash displaced from their hutment village, Maneck Kohlah uprooted from his

hillside home, and Dina Dalal dislocated from her childhood comforts come together as "ecosystem refugees," and work out a new method of survival in a hostile world. They are thrown further from bad to worse, yet they keep their spirits high, expressing immense stoicism as they can only be defeated not destroyed like Hemingway's old man, Santiago. Though they are unable to attain a sustainable growth, they somehow survive. As Mr Valmik suggests, "There is always hope, hope enough to balance our despair. Or we would be lost" (AFB 563).

The environmental Historian Bina Agarwal while analyzing the causes of environmental degradation opines that class, caste and gender exploitations seek serious consideration and appropriate treatment as "class and gender again impinge on the effects of environmental degradation" ("Gender, Environment and Poverty Interlinks" 457). Donald Worster, explains that the current environmental problems are largely of our own making, are in other words, a by-product of culture, "We are facing a global crisis today, not because of how ecosystems function but rather because of how other ethical systems function...but even more, it requires understanding those ethical systems and using that understanding to reform them ("The Wealth of Nature" 27).

The life of the tailors is an apt illustration of the absurdity of human existence, where human will has no power over the illogical course of events. Human well being is inseparably interconnected with the ecological health of the land. This is particularly important for a nation like India where fast economic and industrial development is in progress. The voice of protests that is heard throughout the country against dam constructions, ecological disasters, land acquisition for industrial hubs, reclamation of water bodies for other purposes and so on could be read along with Mistry's ecological and environmental concerns. They invite our attention to the immediacy of environmental question in the country. The novel eloquently articulates the necessity of preserving the integrity of one's environment and of keeping an ecological fine balance.

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